GWYDIR

Ref No PGW (Gd) 4 (CON)

OS Map 115

Grid Ref SH 796 610

Former County Gwynedd

Unitary Authority Conwy

Community Council Trefriw

Designations Listed buildings: Gwydir Castle, including gatehouse, Grade I; terrace arch and garden walls, Grade I; raised walk (causeway), Grade II*; coach house, wall and entrance arch, Grade II; knot garden arch and courtyard walls, Grade II; Gwydir Uchaf chapel Grade I; Gwydir Uchaf house Grade II. Scheduled Ancient Monument: Gwydir Uchaf chapel. Tree preservation orders: several affect castle garden.

Site Evaluation **Grade I**

Primary reasons for grading Partial survival of a sixteenth-century garden including walls and gateways, around contemporary unit-system house; later features of interest including a pool with fountain, yew avenue and box parterre; exceptional possibly early seventeenth-century complex of summer house, viewing mount and bowling green at Gwydir Uchaf.

Type of Site Formal and informal gardens and pleasure grounds; separate features and walled kitchen garden at Gwydir Uchaf.

Main Phases of Construction Sixteenth century; early seventeenth century; late seventeenth century; nineteenth century.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Gwydir Castle is sited on the edge of the flood plain of the River Conwy, at the foot of a rocky crag, just across the river from Llanrwst. It is low-lying and subject to flooding, with a steep, tree-covered hill above. There was already a house here when Maredudd ap Ieuan bought the site in about 1500. Maredudd was the founder of the Wynn family, which subsequently owned the property until 1678, when the heiress Mary Wynn married the first Duke of Ancaster. Their descendants continued to own the estate until 1921.

The stone house, built according to the 'unit system' which occurs elsewhere in north-west Wales (for example Parc, Meirionnydd, and Plas Berw, Anglesey), consists of several almost separate blocks, the first built by Maredudd and his son John early in the sixteenth century, and

the next two by their descendants in the mid sixteenth century and around 1600. The linked gatehouse was also constructed in the mid sixteenth century, but has been much altered since. There are also nineteenth-century and later additions, but similar stone (including some from the demolished abbey at Maenan) has been used throughout and the style faithfully copied so that the whole house appears uniform. A possibly sixteenth-century range attached to the south-east end of the main block. Part of the quadrangle went in the 1720s-30s and the remainder was demolished in 1816-20, as was a range of domestic offices attached to the south-west corner of the southern block. Two serious fires occurred early in the twentieth century, but the buildings have since been restored.

The blocks are arranged in almost a J shape, with the stem running north-east to south-west, and an extra block on the north-west side of the foot; this is nineteenth-century and was built (partly on the site of the demolished domestic range) to balance the north-west side of the top of the T, giving a symmetrical front with a wing at either end on this side. The gatehouse is on the south-east side of the foot of the T, opening on to an enclosed courtyard, and on the north-east a terraced walk runs along the top of the T. Most of the blocks are two-storey but the main block has three storeys and an attic, with a two-and-a-half-storey porch; all are slate-roofed. Most of the windows are mullioned, some also transomed, and the chimney stacks are tall and stone-built. On the south-east facade a row of trefoil finials in local slatestone decorates the roofline, and these are also found on the courtyard walls. Some are copies, and it is clear from 1890s photographs that they had been added to the house fairly recently, but the original examples may have been used to decorate the sixteenth-century garden walls.

There is at least one old engraving which shows a structure carried across the road from the hill on the far side to the castle, near the gatehouse; this resembles a narrow footbridge or an aqueduct. The latter is perhaps more likely as the two known footpaths up the hill begin some distance to the east and west of this point, respectively. A stream, on the other hand, comes down nearby, and may have provided a supply of running water. The structure had apparently gone by fairly early in the nineteenth century.

Gwydir Uchaf was built as a summer house in 1604, the site, on top of the crag above the main house, being chosen for its views. Later in the seventeenth century it was found more convenient than the castle as the main residence and at some stage it was extended to the west, but in the eighteenth century the castle again became the principal house and eventually Gwydir Uchaf became derelict through neglect, and was partly demolished - Thomas Pennant, writing in the 1780s, says that this had happened 'lately'. Pennant also mentions an inscription which had been over the door, as follows:

Bryn Gwedir gwelir goleu adeilad
Uwch dolydd a chaurau
Bryn gwiech adail yn ail ne;
Bron wen Henllys bren hinlle.

This he translated as 'A conspicuous edifice on Gwedir hill, towering over the adjacent land; a well-chosen situation, a second paradise, a fair bank, a palace of royalty', which may not be

strictly accurate but is faithful to the spirit of the original.

In 1808 the ruins of Gwydir Uchaf were inhabited by 'poor persons', but later in the nineteenth century the house was restored, and has since become the headquarters of the Llanrwst Forest District of Forest Enterprise. It is a two-storey stone building with a central porch on the main block, and a slate roof.

Gwydir Uchaf chapel was built on the crag near Gwydir Uchaf as a private chapel for the Wynnes in 1673 (at which time the family were probably resident at Gwydir Uchaf). The chapel seems never to have been licensed. The family employed a chaplain, and in Pennant's time four services a year were still held there. It is a small, simple building of dressed sandstone with a slate roof, and it retains its original painted ceiling, crudely but colourfully executed on a boarded barrel vault.

The coach house and stable block lies against the road wall immediately south-west of the house, and is a square, two-storey stone block with a lower extension built at the same time. The two-storey part is stables with living accommodation over, and has a flat roof, and the extension is the coach house. The building is older than the road wall, of which its outer wall forms part, and was probably built in the 1820s, using some of the materials from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century extensions to the castle demolished shortly before. Lean-to stores and other minor outbuildings continue the range to the north-west.

The pleasure grounds at Gwydir are in two parts; the castle gardens, with trees, walks, a terrace, an avenue of clipped yews and a fountain, all spreading to the north, west and south-east of the castle, which is close to the B5106 on the south, and an area at Gwydir Uchaf, on top of the hill behind, with the summer house, a viewing mount and (at a distance) a bowling green. The two are linked by a zig-zag path up the hill which is known as Lady Mary's Walk.

The terrace, called the Great Terrace, running along the north-eastern side of the house, is long but quite low, and for most of its length is little wider than the wide gravelled walk running along it. At the north-west end, however, there is a small garden area beside the house, with grass and a few shrubs, separated from the walk by a box hedge. The terrace terminates at its north-west end a little beyond the house with a classical pedimented arch set in a slatestone cross wall with flat slate coping. This wall continues north-eastwards for a short distance and to the south-west joins a wall extending north-westwards from the end of the house to enclose this part of the garden. The archway is ornamented with heraldic and initial carvings on the terrace face and obelisk finials over it, now reduced in size. Below is a short flight of steps. At one time there was a straight walk continuing from this end of the terrace to the north corner of the garden, where there is a gate, but the path is now disused from a short distance beyond the terrace, although it is still visible as a low bank in the grass.

Along the north-east side of the terrace the slight fall in ground level is managed by a short, fairly gentle slope mostly occupied by a wide laurel hedge, which can be seen in photographs taken in 1896 and 1901. A shallow flight of stone steps leads down into a more or less rectangular area which used to be laid out with a pattern of beds and borders used for bedding

plants. On the axis of the steps is a huge old yew tree which may be as old as, or older than, the garden and which was formerly clipped. This rectangular area below (north-east of) the terrace walk may have been the original, sixteenth-century, enclosed garden. Two of its sides are formed by probably sixteenth-century features: as well as the terrace walk on the south-west, the north-west end is enclosed by the main length of early garden wall. A hedge used to run along the south-east edge, parallel with the latter, and possibly marking the site of another early wall. The fourth side, the north-east, may have always been open to the view.

The large walled courtyard to the south-east of the house, which is roughly square, may represent an enlargement of an original, smaller, entrance courtyard. The gatehouse still gives on to it in the west corner. The wall round the courtyard is about 1.5 m high, with flat slate slab coping and trefoil finials at intervals, these latter probably not in their original positions - they may have come from the older garden wall in the first place. This wall cannot all be original as parts of it replace ranges of buildings which formerly surrounded the courtyard, and it is likely that it was all rebuilt in the nineteenth century, after the buildings were demolished. The south-east gateway is Tudor in date and style but was probably moved here in the 1820s. The gateway in the north-east wall, giving on to the terrace, is simple, with a slate lintel and trefoil finial.

The courtyard is occupied by a large circular box parterre representing a Tudor rose, with shrub borders filling the east and south corners; there is a small lean-to outbuilding in the east corner. Until the early nineteenth century there were further ranges of buildings around the courtyard, and without knowing the exact extent of these it is not possible to say whether or by how much the courtyard was enlarged, but it seems likely to have been extended on the south-east side. If so, this was probably done soon after the outbuildings were demolished, in the 1820s. Pennant describes the house as being built around a 'greater' and a 'lesser' court, but as so much has changed since the late eighteenth century one can only guess that this was the 'greater'.

The unplanted part of the courtyard is gravelled, with cobbles at some depth below. The parterre is arranged in eight simple open segments, and was originally surrounded by a circular path with a scalloped box hedge on the outer edge. Only one or two short lengths of this survive, the rest having been overcome by the shrubs in the borders in the corners, and on the side nearest the house probably removed deliberately to open up the courtyard space.

To the north-west of the house is a large, gently sloping lawn, the main feature of which is a long avenue of yews aligned on the house front. There is a massive stone seat across the north-western end of the yew avenue, made from a single enormous slate slab. There is an area of paving in front and a couple of box bushes behind which may be the remains of a hedge. This probably dates from the early nineteenth-century phase of improvements.

A third of the way down the avenue is an octagonal pool, edged with quartz boulders, and with an island of similar rocks hiding the piping for a fountain. This is in the romantic style and is typically Victorian in character. However, under the quartz rocks around the pool is a stone edging, lacking its coping, which may put the original construction of the pool back in time,

possibly even to the late sixteenth or seventeenth century. Water flows into the pool through a culvert under the road from a small stream which is culverted all round the opposite hillside; from the relationship of the culvert to Lady Mary's Walk it seems possible that they could be contemporary, and it is therefore possible that the stream originally supplied an early water feature. An irregularly-shaped, larger pond is shown on older maps nearby, and an estate map of about 1785 shows a leaf-shaped pond, the 'Pwll Ddu', in the field just beyond, but these were probably utilitarian.

Older maps show a complete circuit of walks round the garden, with linking paths between; many of these have now fallen out of use and become grassed over, but in most cases they can still be seen, or their harder surface can be felt. Some have been completely removed in opening up the large parking area south-east of the house. Gravel-surfaced paths remain in the extreme south-eastern area of the garden, and leading back from the car parking area across the lawn towards the house.

A path leading off the original outer circuit path towards the outbuildings west of the house is lined with similar quartz boulders to those around the fountain. The walk appears to have been originally planted with hedges, laurel to the south and cypress to the north, but these have grown into full-sized trees, obscuring the rockwork. There are, in the same area, a few places where similar quartz rocks have been arranged round the bases of trees, creating small circular raised beds. This idea seems to have been copied, less successfully, later on, and there are many little informal rock features of this kind dotted about.

To the south of the house the garden is informal, planted with specimen trees and shrubs. At the extreme southern end is an area of informally planted trees, mainly oaks, called the 'Royal' and 'Statesmen's' Gardens as the trees were ceremonially planted at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth by visiting dignitaries. There is a very large sycamore, the survivor of two large trees, the other an oak, in the car park area to the south-east of the house, and a sweet chestnut in the extreme south corner of the grounds. This too was one of a pair, and the stump of the other, although partly rotted, suggests an approximate age of 300 years by counting the rings.

The garden is bounded on the north-east by a ha-ha, which runs from the Llanrwst road right round back to the Bettws-y-Coed road (B5106) south of the house, including an area which now belongs to the neighbouring farm. All the area between the ha-ha and the river is shown as parkland on older maps, and would obviously have formed the main aspect from the house and garden, any other view being shut off by Gwydir Uchaf hill. The ha-ha is probably early nineteenth-century in date, as there was a building phase at this time, but the line of this boundary is unaltered sine at least the 1785 survey and it may be earlier.

The walls along the road boundary are not as well built as the garden walls, and are probably nineteenth-century in origin, having been rebuilt c. 1950. The highest and best-built stretch is that from the main gateway on to the Bettws road to the western corner of the garden; behind the house, and to the west, where the outbuildings are against it, this wall has a flat coping and is decorated with typical trefoil finials. There are several gateways through the road walls,

and one (disused) on to the Llanrwst road, near the north corner of the garden, is balanced by a similar rather imposing gateway leading into the field opposite, although this area is not included in the parkland shown on early maps. Two doorways, both with doors, on to the Bettws road, one up a flight of slate steps from the back door and one, now disused, next to the main vehicular entrance, have the same flat slate lintels as the doorway between the terrace and the courtyard; both have trefoil finials. The entrance to Lady Mary's Walk on the other side of the road, through the wall revetting the steep slope of the hill, is through a similar doorway, with steps but missing its finial. The two vehicular entrances (one to the parking area and the other at the end of the range of outbuildings to the west) are wide. The car parking area and its entrance date to c. 1977. The west entrance has gate piers of different construction from the wall, decorated on top with natural stones, including some quartz, set in concrete. The piers are nineteenth-century in date but were rebuilt further back c. 1950. The finials are of that date.

An interesting feature beyond the garden is the stone causeway crossing the flat former parkland between the gardens and the River Conwy, leading from what is now the parking area to the east of the house. This is quite narrow, only about 1 m wide, and is built of stacked slate slabs, about 2 m high. At the riverside it turned northwards and followed the river bank; this part has now been almost destroyed but the remains of what may have been a quay still exist at the end of it. It is supposed to have been used for bringing supplies up from the river, and as it was the indefatigable Sir John Wynne who made the Conwy navigable to this point, it may date from his time. Sir John also first enclosed the park, and the causeway may have had another function from the start as the park's southern boundary.

The wall forming the garden boundary leading away from it to the south, in an S curve, appears more recent than the causeway (perhaps contemporary with the ha-ha), but beyond this short stretch, between it and the beginning of the ha-ha on this side, is a length of apparently older wall which may be of the same date as the causeway. Stone steps lead down from the end of the causeway into what is now the parking area. A late eighteenth-century watercolour by Colt Hoare shows a square, pyramidal-roofed summer house, thought to date to 1592, at the Gwydir end of the causeway, suggesting the latter's use by that time as a leisure walk; it was also flanked by an avenue of mature trees, one of which, an ancient sycamore, survives. In the nineteenth century the causeway was known as the 'Chinese Walk'.

The causeway may also have had other uses. It might clearly have had a role in flood prevention, the flat park and garden being very susceptible to inundation, and its height is probably sufficent to have made it an effective stockproof barrier.

At one time there were two paths leading up to Gwydir Uchaf, one from a point west of the house and one south-east of it. The latter is visible but seems to be little used, but the former, known as Lady Mary's Walk, is probably the one referred to in the seventeenth century as a 'low, melancholy walk' (a description which still fits it), and is well made and well preserved, with a gravelled surface, slate edging, revetting where necessary, and steps at the steepest points. It comes out between Gwydir Uchaf house and chapel, and another path leads off it towards the viewing mount. The wall of this path to the mount, where it passes the chapel, shows clear signs of having once been rendered.

A hollow way, partly roughly stone-paved, descends from quite close to the bowling green to join the road just south of the castle. This would probably have been passable for horses, and could have been the route by which equipment and provisions were carried up to the bowling green.

There are some remants of an early, probably seventeenth-century, garden immediately around the house of Gwydir Uchaf. The first is a rubble-revetted viewing platform at the east end of the house. Now used as a car park, this would have given spectacular views down the valley and of Gwydir and its gardens. On the west side of this is an ancient yew and the stump of another, both probably seventeenth-century plantings. The large viewing mount at Gwydir Uchaf is immediately behind the chapel, and is about 50 m in diameter with a spiral path which encircles it three times before reaching the top. Were it not for tree growth it would give panoramic views, not only over Gwydir Uchaf, the castle, the gardens and the park, but also over Llanrwst and a stretch of the Conwy valley. The path is edged with holly and has been recently cleared and gravelled. The trees at present on the mount are of no great age and probably self-sown, but there are stumps of some much larger trees, up to 1.5 m across, which confirm the mount as an early feature. Mounts were a common feature of grander gardens during the Tudor and Stuart periods.

The bowling green, named on a map of about 1820, was mentioned in an article of 1901 and was used by local people as a picnic spot and for carol-singing until the 1930s. It was then afforested and 'lost', until recently rediscovered and clear-felled by Forest Enterprise. It is magnificently sited on the edge of the outcrop, with views up and down the valley, but is at a surprising distance from both Gwydir Castle and Gwydir Uchaf - about 750 m from the latter.

The bowling green is revetted with dry-stone walling to level it, along the cliff side. There is no formal walling or seating, but some large slabs which look as though they may have been used as seats lie on the ground at one end. They may relate to later use as a picnic spot (the bowling green was not being used for its proper purpose in 1901). There is also some stone walling beyond the bowling green to the south, but only a few courses remain and it is very overgrown, so hard to interpret. No map has come to light showing any structure here.

Sir John Wynne, builder of Gwydir Uchaf house in 1604, mentions playing bowls in a letter to his chaplain. This perhaps supports the suggestion that both the bowling green and the viewing mount are contemporary with the 'summer house' of Gwydir Uchaf. Local legend has it that there were two bowling greens at Gwydir, the existing one being the earlier. Of the second there is apparently no trace.

There are reasonable grounds for suggesting an early date for both parts of the garden. The older part of the castle dates to the sixteenth century and as the garden walls and terrace walk are structurally integrated with the house, it is quite likely that the first garden dates from the mid sixteenth century. A Tudor-arched entrance at the south-east side of the courtyard (which may have been moved here in the early nineteenth century) is one of the earliest remnants of the garden, dating to the mid sixteenth century. It is ornamented with the carved initials of John

Wynn ap Meredudd (died 1559), with heraldic eagle and lion carvings in the spandrels. The Great Terrace, on the north-east side of the house, may be contemporary.

It was probably Sir John Wynn (1553-1627) who further developed the gardens, known to have been of some sophistication in his time. They featured 'alleys and walks', a labyrinth, bowling greens, a pigeon house (1597) and a 'pleasure house' (1592), both now gone, although in c. 1785 there was a gazebo in the south-eastern part of the garden and an L-shaped building in the western. Oranges, lemons and bay trees were grown. At the north-west end of the Great Terrace is an arch dating to Sir John Wynn's time. The adjacent wall and steps are probably contemporary.

The house at Gwydir Uchaf was built as a summer residence by Sir John Wynn, who himself recorded that he played bowls and enjoyed the view. It is therefore entirely likely that he was also responsible for the construction of the bowling green and viewing mount, and the paths by which to reach them from the house and from each other. The path known as Lady Mary's Walk may refer to Mary Wynn, the heiress, who married the future Duke of Ancaster in 1678, but the path may even date from before her time as there is likely to have been a direct link between the main house and Gwydir Uchaf from 1604 onwards. This would support the suggestion that 'Lady Mary' was Lady Mary Mostyn (1585-1653), Sir John Wynn's daughter.

In 1670 the fourth baronet, Sir Richard Wynn, made a 'new garden', which may have been the area to the north-west of the house, called the 'Old Dutch Garden' in the nineteenth century. There may have been terraces from this period across the north-west front of the house, which were later removed, probably in the 1820s, and made into the present grassy slope; there is little to see, but in walking slowly down the slope three distinct, if slight, ridges and dips can be felt. Contemporary, or possibly earlier, is a terrace that runs along the west boundary of the garden and is now partly obscured by later planting and outhouses. This has a rubble stone revetment wall, possibly originally rendered, and runs from the house to a position, just beyond a pair of nineteenth-century gate piers in the boundary wall, opposite the start of Lady Mary's Walk. Beyond, to the north, there is the suggestion of further terraces, now gone, in the grass slope. The yew avenue, originally formally clipped, which leads down to an octagonal fountain from the house may have originated in this late seventeenth-century phase, although some of the yews are nineteenth-century replacements. Probably also dating to this period are four huge and ancient cedars of Lebanon (introduced into Britain c. 1638) which stand to the east of the house.

From c. 1730, when the first Duke and Duchess of Ancaster died, until early in the nineteenth century little seems to have been done at Gwydir, probably because the house was not the Ancaster family's main home, but in the second two decades of the nineteenth century there was another phase of improvements to both house and grounds. In the 1820s, after demolishing some of the Elizabethan additions to the house, Lord Willoughby de Eresby made alterations to the garden. The famous architect Sir Charles Barry designed a kitchen wing and Lewis Kennedy laid out a knot garden in the courtyard to the south-east of the house, in the shape of a Tudor rose. The plan survives in a book of drawings. Herbaceous borders, parterres of bedding plants and some turf steps (all recorded in photographs), on the east side of the house, have disappeared.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Earl of Carrington made some minor additions, including the 'Royal' and 'Statesmen's' gardens at the south end of the site. In 1899 and 1911 members of the royal family, senior statesmen and foreign dignitaries planted trees in this area and some retain their commemorative lead plaques.

The former parkland to the north-east of the garden (originally enclosed by Sir John Wynn in 1597) now no longer belongs to the castle and is essentially agricultural in character, having lost most of its specimen trees. Old trees do remain on the field boundaries, however, especially to the north of the Llanrwst road, an area which, according to old maps, was not included within the park. Parc Mawr, the deer park, on the wooded hill to the south, retains much of its surrounding dry-stone wall, probably dating to c. 1597. At Gwydir Uchaf there have been many changes through time due to its chequered history. It became the main residence for a while in the later seventeenth century, and probably acquired a garden of its own at this time, of which the viewing platform, an orchard enclosure and walled garden may be the surviving remnants; but it was subsequently abandoned and eventually partly demolished. Restored in the nineteenth century, it was once again inhabited and the garden features re-used. The mount, however, was probably forgotten about and overgrown, and the bowling green succumbed to neglect and, later, afforestation, during and after the Second World War. Finally the house came into the hands of Forest Enterprise, whose local headquarters it now is, and the bowling green and mount have been rediscovered and cleared.

Gwydir Uchaf kitchen garden is a half-acre walled garden, now divided in two lengthwise, with two modern houses built in it. Little therefore remains except the walls, but in 1928 it was a kitchen garden with a small greenhouse and tool shed in the north-east corner, and battens on the walls for espalier fruit trees. The greenhouse is also shown on the 1913 Ordnance Survey 25 in. map. It is probably most likely that the garden dates from after the nineteenth-century restoration of Gwydir Uchaf, but it is just possible that it survives from an earlier time, or marks the position of an earlier garden, as there was a period in the seventeenth century when Gwydir Uchaf was used as the main residence. There is also a seventeenth-century reference to Gwydir wine, and some shelter would certainly have been required for growing vines.

A former orchard is also mentioned in 1928; this was to the south of the viewing mount, where an odd-shaped enclosure survives. It was being used as a nursery in 1928 and is already named as such on the 1913 map. Again, it is just possible that this was a pre-nineteenth-century feature, although an estate map of about 1785 names an area near the foot of the hill, roughly opposite the entrance to the castle car park, as Gwydir Uchaf's orchard.

No kitchen garden survives at the castle, but the 1913 map shows a small area of glass in an enclosure south of the garden, which is now part of the farm. There were also a few fruit trees in this area. In the north corner of the former park, near Llanrwst bridge, was the castle nursery, roughly corresponding to the area now used as a recreation ground and car park. Areas around this, called 'garden' on the estate map of about 1785, may have been used as kitchen gardens at that date.

Sources

Primary

Information from Messrs P. Welford and D. Whitmarsh

Drawing of Gwydir Uchaf as it was in 1684 (photocopy in Forest Enterprise collection)

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Secondary

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