

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

SITE DOSSIER

SITE NAME	Piercefield Park and the Wyndcliff
REF. NO	PGW (Gt) 40
OS MAP	162
GRID REF	ST 527956
FORMER COUNTY	Monmouthshire
COMMUNITY COUNCIL	St. Arvans
DESIGNATIONS	Listed building: Ruins of Piercefield Grade II AONB (Wye Valley) SSSI (Blackcliff-Wyndcliff; Pierce, Alcove and Piercefield Woods) SAM (Mn 20: Pierce Wood Camps)
SITE EVALUATION	Grade I
Primary reasons for grading	An early and outstanding landscaping of a 'sublime' landscape, which became one of the most famous sublime/Picturesque walks of the second half of the 18th century and an essential part of the 'Wye Tour'.
TYPE OF SITE	Landscape park, walk with viewpoints laid out along edge of sublime and picturesque landscape of the Wye valley.
MAIN PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION	1752-72; 1798; 1828
VISITED BY/DATE	Elisabeth Whittle/May, August 1991

HOUSE

Piercefield

Grid ref ST 528957

Date/style 1785-94/neo-classical

Brief description

Piercefield, now a roofless shell, stands near the top of cliffs on the west bank of the river Wye, a mile or so north of Chepstow. The house faces south-east, overlooking the southern half of the park, with a view across the park to the east (Gloucestershire) side of the Wye valley.

There has been a house on this site from at least the early 14th century, and for several generations, until 1727, it was held by the Walter family. In 1736 Valentine Morris (the elder) bought the estate, then c. 300 acres, and it was his son Valentine who transformed and enlarged the estate between c. 1752 and 1772. Debt forced him to sell in 1784, to George Smith. Smith commissioned John Soane to make plans for a new house, and had most of the old one pulled down. Soane's plans were not followed, but the house that was built (the central core of the present one) was similar to Soane's Shotesham Hall in Norfolk. Smith sold (bankrupt) in 1794, before the roof was on, to Colonel Mark Wood, who pulled down the rest of the old house and extended and finished the new one, using the architect Joseph Bonomi, who designed the twin pavilions that flank the central block, the curving central Doric portico (now gone) and the lavish interiors. There were various owners until 1923 when the house was abandoned and sold to Chepstow Racecourse. In the Second World War it was used by American troops stationed there as target practice.

What remains today is a roofless shell, standing to its full height. It is a three-storey building of brick with a stone facing. All windows have gone, but some of the classical detail remains (Ionic pilasters, cornice, 2 Doric columns and the bases of the rest of the portico) on the main (SE) front. The twin pavilions remain, much ruined and overgrown, with some of the bas-reliefs still in place. The whole site is neglected and overgrown with trees and shrubs.

OUTBUILDINGS

Stables and farm buildings

Grid ref ST 526957

Date/style, and brief description

To the west of the house is an enclosed yard with a long range of stables on its south side and a large barn on the north. The stable range is two-storey, of rendered stone with a slate roof, and is in a ruinous condition, with most of the roof missing. The barn is a traditional stone barn and appears older than the rest of the buildings. It has large central openings on the north and south sides, and is generally in good condition.

THE PARK

Central grid ref ST 525955

Date/style c. 1752-72; 1794

GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

Piercefield Park lies along the west bank of the river Wye immediately to the north of Chepstow, stretching from Chepstow to the village of St. Arvans. It is a roughly triangular area of about 300 acres. The house stands in the middle of the park, near the cliff on the edge of the Wye valley. The park is gently rolling except for the eastern edge, where the ground, here densely wooded, drops precipitately, and in places in cliffs, several hundred feet down to the river Wye. The river loops in two enormous bends along the eastern boundary, and this naturally dramatic scenery, on both sides of the river, is what led to the fame of Piercefield in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The original house, home of the Walter family, stood in a small park of about 300 acres, bought in 1736 by Valentine Morris (the elder). In about 1752 his son, also Valentine, came to live here, and the present park is largely his creation. He increased the estate to about 2130 acres (Sale Particulars 1793), planted trees in groves, clumps and single specimens, and made the famous walk along the lip of the Wye valley. There is no record of any professional help with the landscaping, but a Gloucestershire man, Richard Owen Cambridge (who had tried to buy Piercefield in 1748, a gentleman poet and man of taste) had a hand in laying out the walks. A local builder from Chepstow, William Knowles, directed work on the park, and Charles Howells from Pont y Saeson laid out the walks.

The western side of the park was largely open grassland, known as the 'Upper Lawn' (the northern end) and the 'Lower Lawn' (the southern end, in front of the house), with scattered trees and clumps, some of which survive. At the southern end is a small deciduous wood, Park Grove, and along the western boundary a narrow strip of large mature deciduous trees, some of which may date to about 1794 when the boundary wall was built. The eastern side of the park, along the Wye valley, is largely wooded with semi-natural woodland, mostly beech, yew, small-leaved lime, large-leaved lime, and in places several species of whitebeam. On the less precipitous slopes the woods have a relict coppice structure, with some standards.

The famous walk, about three miles long, was made by Valentine Morris soon after 1752, between the south end of the 'Lower Lawn' and the carriage road to Tintern, north-east of St Arvans. The walk generally follows the top of the slope or cliffs down to the Wye, except to the east of the house, where it cuts across the neck of the long peninsula of Pierce Wood. It is narrow, winding, with earth or rock underfoot, and is in places rock-cut into the cliff face. In one place (the Giant's Cave) the path passes through a tunnel in the rock. It is entirely enclosed in woodland, and at intervals features and viewpoints were made to give dramatic views out over the valley, down to the river, over the Bristol Channel, and down to the Lancaut peninsula on the other side of the river. From the south, the features are: The Alcove, The Platform, The Grotto, Above Pierce Wood, The Double View, Halfway Seat, The Druid's Temple, The Giant's Cave, a seat near two beeches, Lovers' Leap, and The Temple. Just north of the Giant's Cave the original path split, the upper one rising up to the plateau edge and leading to Lover's Leap and the Temple, the lower one (now the Wye Valley Walk) leading to the Cold

Bath, from which one path led back up to the plateau and another down to the river. Contemporary visitors also mention a Chinese Seat, but it has disappeared and its exact whereabouts are unknown. Built structures remain at The Alcove (a seat and railings), The Platform (a stone platform and railings), The Grotto (a stone alcove, whose inner lining of spars and other minerals has mostly gone), The Giant's Cave (tunnel through the rock), and the Cold Bath (roofless stone building with sunken bath inside). A few stones remain of the Druid's Temple, formerly a circle of upright stones. Some of the viewpoints can be identified from maps (Coxe), and from the remains of level platforms protruding from the path. The Temple, which stood at the north end of the walk, was demolished in about 1800.

Below the Cold Bath a path led down to Martridge Meadow, beside the Wye, then along the river southwards and up rock-cut steps to the house. These steps were already overgrown and dangerous by 1785 (William Marshall). The climax of the visit by tourists to Piercefield was the further walk northwards to the top of the much higher Wyndcliff, from which there were spectacular views southwards over the lower Wye valley, the Bristol Channel and beyond.

Almost as soon as the walks had been made they became famous, as fashionable taste came to value spectacular and dramatic scenery (the sublime). Piercefield became a major attraction on the Wye Tour, a tourist route down the Wye from Ross-on-Wye to Chepstow that was popularised from 1745 by Rev. Dr. John Egerton of Ross, and after 1770 by William Gilpin. Early admirers included William Shenstone, Count Alexsey Pushkin (Russian ambassador) and Sir Joseph Banks (visited 1767). The most admired views were those from the grotto and the Wyndcliff. During Valentine Morris's occupation open house was kept (his generosity was partly responsible for his downfall), servants showed visitors around, and for their amusement a gun was placed near the Giant's Cave, the firing of which produced a spectacular echo. After Morris's departure in 1772 the walks were opened to the public on certain days of the week. In 1781 (Torrington Diaries) the walks were already 'ill kept', and some were 'almost impassable'.

During George Smith's occupancy (1784-94) it appears that some of the timber in the park was cut down, including the elm walk (an avenue at the north end of the park), and the walks were neglected. Smith built a circular stone tower, Grove House, in Park Grove, for his talented daughter Elizabeth, a young 'bluestocking'. This has now gone.

Great improvements were made by Colonel Wood after he bought the estate in 1794. He finished the building of the new house, increased the estate to c. 3000 acres, improved the timber, and restored the walks. A new lodge was built at the south end of the park (Lions Lodge), and a new drive from it to the house designed by Adam Mickel. Wood also built the stone wall along the west boundary of the park.

During the nineteenth century, from 1802 on, the estate had several owners, and few changes were made. The walks fell into disrepair, and were closed to visitors c. 1850. The major addition was made not by the owners of Piercefield but by the Duke of Beaufort, who had his steward Osmond Wyatt make the steps known as the '365 Steps' from the top of the Wyndcliff down to the new Tintern road in 1828. This is a precipitous winding path, partly rock-cut, which has recently been restored. Near the top is a semi-circular platform with a low stone parapet topped by iron railings called the Eagle's Nest. From it there are spectacular views over the Wye valley, the Bristol Channel, and beyond. It was constructed soon after the 365 Steps. At the foot of the steps a cottage, now called Moss Cottage - a thatched cottage with Gothic windows

and stained glass - was built, in which visitors could take tea. It was demolished in the 20th century.

The park was sold by Henry Hastings Clay in 1926 to the Chepstow Racecourse Company (there had been horse racing at nearby Oakgrove since the 19th century), and the western half has been in use as a racecourse ever since.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Drive

The main drive was designed by Adam Mickel c. 1798. It enters the south end of the park at Lions Lodge and runs north-eastwards in a series of curves to the south-west side of the house, where it forks. The northern fork leads to the stables, the southern curves round to the front of the house (it formerly continued round at the foot of the ha-ha slope, but this part has now been grassed over. The surface is rough gravel, and the drive is now used as a farm track, the southern end being obscured by Racecourse stabling.

The former secondary drive from Cliff Lodge to the house has been overlain by the racecourse tracks.

Ha-ha

The ground in front of the south-east front of the house slopes gently down to a semi-circular grass scarp, formerly the ha-ha.

To the east of the house, south of a large cedar tree, is a rectangular terraced area (? former lawn tennis court).

The walks

The main walk is a c. three mile path along the top of the cliffs of the west bank of the river Wye, stretching from near The Alcove (ST 529948) at the southern end to near the site of The Temple (ST 522968) at the northern end, north-east of St. Arvans. The walk is now part of the Wye Valley Walk, and is reached at the southern end from the School/Leisure Centre on the northern edge of Chepstow and at the northern end from the Forestry Commission car park on the A466 at the foot of the Wyndcliff, from where the main original path is regained near the Giant's Cave.

The path is winding, narrow, and has a natural surface - in most places earthen, in some rock. In one place, south of The Alcove, it is built out over the slope, with a stone revetment wall holding it up. It is clear for most of its length, although the section north of the Giant's Cave, where the Wye Valley Walk branches off from it, is less open, and in places overgrown. The original path up to the top of the scarp from the Giant's Cave is completely overgrown and impassable, and a new path has been cut. Opposite the house there are several branches off the path up to the house and walled garden. The rock-cut steps below the house, which used to lead down to the river, have long since disappeared into the undergrowth.

From the Giant's Cave (ST 525963) the Wye Valley Walk follows an original subsidiary path which led down to the Cold Bath in Lower Martridge Wood. From the Cold Bath the path wound up the steep slope above to The Temple. This path is visible but overgrown and inaccessible. A further path, now gone, led down from the Cold Bath to Martridge Meadow.

The configuration of roads and paths at the north end of the park has changed since Valentine Morris's day, when the walk on up to the Wyndcliff (now partly a public road). The building of the new road to Tintern in 1820-21 changed this arrangement. The walk then stopped at the park wall near The Temple.

Viewpoints and features on walk

These are partly structural, partly built. Most will be considered here (for details of the Cold Bath, the Platform and The Grotto see BUILT FEATURES).

1. The Alcove

ST 529948

This is the southernmost feature. It is a level platform built out over the river on a natural bluff. From it there are good views to the south-east of the lower Wye and Chepstow. Around its curving outer edge are ruinous iron railings, and at the back is a semi-circular stone 'alcove', consisting of a slightly raised platform with a shallow brick step along its outer, straight edge, enclosed on its other three sides by a ruinous stone wall now c. 1.5 m. high at its highest (at the back).

2. The Platform

ST 533954

This is the next feature to be encountered on the walk. As it is a built structure it will be found in BUILT FEATURES.

3. The Grotto

ST 533957

The next feature. Also in BUILT FEATURES.

To the west of the grotto, next to the path, is a small standing stone, to the east of which is a large deep rectangular rock-cut hole (? natural).

4. The Double View

ST 530957

A natural bluff over the river, with views both up and down river and southwards across the park.

5. The Halfway Seat

ST 528957

The seat has gone, but the levelled platform on a bluff over the river on which it stood remains.

Between the Halfway Seat and the Pleasant View some visitors reported at 'Druid's Temple' - a circle of standing stones. There are two standing stones (no more than 1.5 m. high, of irregular shape) next to the path in this area, and these may be all that is left of the Druid's Temple.

The next feature to the north, just south of the Giant's Cave, was Pleasant View (ST 525963), where the path takes an outward curve. There are very good views from it but no structures remain.

6. The Giant's Cave

ST 525963

This is a curving tunnel cut into the rock-face, with a large opening on the south side and a smaller one on the north. Next to the south entrance is a small stretch of low walling along the outer side of the path. Inside the 'Cave' is a small chamber.

There was originally a carved stone giant perched above one of the entrances, holding a boulder ready to throw down. This has long since disappeared.

7. Lovers' Leap

ST 523967

Path takes an outward curve over a natural bluff with a sheer drop below. Spectacular views downstream. No built structures remain (it was originally fenced with iron railings).

8. The Temple

ST 522968

This was a turret with a platform, standing near the present A466 road. It was demolished in about 1800. Its position is not exactly clear, but could have been just inside the field near the north end of the walk, where there is now a rectangular platform.

The Wyndcliff

The 365 Steps is a winding path, partly cut into the rock, from the foot of the Wyndcliff on the A 466 to the top, near a built feature called the Eagle's Nest (ST 527974). The path was made in 1828 by the Duke of Beaufort. The path is very steep, rising several hundred feet up the near sheer cliffs of the Wyndcliff. The original steps have largely been obliterated, and have been recently restored.

The Eagle's Nest, near the top of the 365 Steps (ST 527974) is a semi-circular platform with a low stone parapet topped by iron railings built out over the steep slope. Below it is a narrow platform with similar parapet and railings, with a rock-cut alcove at the back, beneath the upper platform. From this spot is a magnificent view of the Wye valley, Chepstow, the Bristol Channel and beyond.

WATER FEATURES

Towards the north end of the walk are two small streams which run down the steep slope to the river. The lower path crosses these, and the northernmost one has been utilised for the Cold Bath.

BUILT FEATURES

The Platform

ST 533954

The second feature on the walk (from the south), this is an elevated platform c. 3.5 m. high built out over the steep slope. It is of stone rubble construction and stands to its full height, with the remains of iron railings along its south side.

The grotto

ST 533957

The next feature northwards on the walk, this stands on ground sloping to the east, just inside the east side of a small Iron Age fort, on the west side of the path. It is a domed alcove built of brick on a stone foundation, and is c. 2.5 m. high in the centre. Almost all the original interior lining of spars, other minerals and 'slack of iron and copper ore' (1793 Sale Particulars) has gone, with only a few pieces sticking out from the surface.

The Cold Bath

ST 525968

The Cold Bath is situated in dense laurel undergrowth next to the subsidiary path (now the Wye Valley Walk), just above the path on the south side of a small stream. The Coxe map shows three buildings here, but only the remains of two are visible. The main building is a small rectangular stone and brick building, now roofless, and with partly ruined walls. It stands at the foot of a slope, and water is led into it from the small stream to the west. Inside is a rectangular sunken bath lined with brick, and with some white tiling still in place. It is now almost full of leaves and rubble. A stone-lined channel runs along the north side of the building, and curves round to its east. This appears to be a diversion or overflow channel from the stream, but is now dry.

Just to the east of the bath is a mound topped by the ruinous stone walls of a small building. The purpose and nature of this building is unclear, but it was probably part of the Cold Bath complex.

The ice-house

ST 525961

A large, well preserved ice-house is situated on the plateau edge in woodland to the north of the kitchen garden. It is an egg-shaped brick-lined structure, the lower half sunk into the ground, the upper half above ground and turf-covered. Half of the upper part has gone, and as there is no entrance it is assumed that it was in the collapsed part.

The lodges, gates and park walls

The lodges and park walls were erected by Colonel Mark Wood c. 1794.

The main lodge stands at the southern end of the park, at the main entrance, and is known as Lions Lodge (ST 523945). This consists of twin square two-storey classical pavilions with pyramidal roofs which flank a plain gate screen with a central gateway flanked by large square rusticated stone piers. These are topped by recumbent stone lions. The gateway is flanked by smaller stone square-arched pedestrian entrances. The iron railings and gates are plain.

To the west of the house, on the west boundary of the park, is Cliff Lodge (ST 521957). This is a two-storey small stone building on the south side of an entrance. The windows and door on the road side are blocked. The park wall curves inwards to the gate, which is a simple iron one with square stone piers.

The south, west and north sides of the park are bounded by a stone wall. On the south side this is a high wall, up to 4 m., ruinous in places. On the west it is well preserved and stands to its full height. It has been pierced in places for entrances to the racecourse. The wall at the north end of the park is ruinous in places, but stands to its full height at the eastern end, where there is a plain entrance, originally the northern end of the walk.

PLANTED COMPONENTS

Piercefield Park can be divided into two main areas as far as planting goes: the open parkland which occupies the rolling plateau above the Wye valley, and the steep slopes and cliffs down to the river Wye on the eastern side of the park. The former is largely open grassland, partly occupied by the racecourse, with the semi-natural deciduous woodland of Park Grove at the southern end, with ornamental planting mainly confined to the southern half, to the south of the house. The second part is thickly clothed with natural woodland (mainly deciduous, with wild yew).

In front of the house is a sloping 'lawn' of grass, beyond which are clumps (mixed deciduous and coniferous, including Scots pines) on the brow of the higher ground. The most prominent clump is mainly of Scots pines. There are also scattered isolated deciduous trees, mainly oaks. Near the house, to its south-west, is a small plantation of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees, with iron railings around it. Some isolated mature trees, including planes, near the house are also surrounded by iron railings, into which the trunks of some are biting. To the east of the house is a large cedar tree.

The northern end of the park is largely open grassland, with a few isolated deciduous trees. Near the north corner are two large isolated oaks and a group of three small pines.

The western boundary of the park is planted with a narrow band of mature deciduous trees, mainly oak, horse chestnut and beech.

The natural woodland along the east side of the park is dense, with a scrubby understorey. There are a few areas of ornamental planting, now gone wild: evergreens, mainly laurels, around the grotto; laurels to the north-east of the kitchen garden; yews behind the Alcove (possibly natural). There are also mature beech trees along the wood's western boundary which may have been planted.

BOUNDARIES

S: stone wall (ruined in places)

W: stone wall

N: stone wall (ruined in places)

E: ditch and outer bank topped by iron fencing

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

Essential setting: Wyndcliff to the north; Livox peninsula; river Wye from Prior's Reach to Chepstow; Lancut peninsula (Glos.); E bank and cliffs of river Wye (Glos.)

Viewpoints: A: from south-east front of house across park south-eastwards to Wye valley, Gloucestershire, Bristol Channel and beyond

B: from the Alcove ESE

C: from the Platform ESE (now overgrown)

D: from the grotto SE (now overgrown)

E: from the Double View N

F: from the Double View S

G: from the Halfway Seat N

H: from the Pleasant View E

I: from the S end of the Giant's Cave E

J: from Lovers' Leap NE (across Lower Martridge Wood to the Wyndcliff and Livox peninsula) (partly overgrown)

K: from the Eagle's Nest E-S (panoramic view, stretching as far as far side of Bristol Channel)

LAND-USE

Agricultural: permanent pasture, grazing by cows and sheep

Commercial: racecourse, including stands, stables etc.; cross-country course in eastern part of park.

Unmanaged woodland

ELEMENTS OF BOTANICAL OR OTHER NATURE CONSERVATION INTEREST

Natural hanging woodland on edge of Wye valley

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

Structural components: most

Water features:

Built components: most

Planted components: some

UTILITARIAN GARDENS

Kitchen garden

Grid ref ST 527957

Date/style 2nd half of 18th century/walled

DESCRIPTION

The walled kitchen garden, nearly 3 acres in extent, is situated to the north-west of the house, north of the stables. It was built in the second half of the 18th century, and is described in the 1793 Sale Particulars. It is rectangular in shape, aligned NW-SE, and is bounded on the west by a stone wall and on all other sides by a brick wall on a stone foundation, standing to its full height of c. 4 m. Down the middle (NW-SE) is a brick cross-wall. The interior is now grassed over and featureless except for a few old fruit trees and a circular brick-lined well surrounded by iron railings in the middle of the north-eastern half. Against the wall in the north corner is a small simple two-storey cottage of brick and slate. This is not ruined, and is lived in.

Along the inside of the north-west wall is a range of ruined glasshouses. Their glass has gone, but some of their structures remain, such as stone paths, raised beds, and iron heating pipes. There is one ruined free-standing glass-house in the south-western half of the garden. Along the outside of the north-west wall is a range of single-storey bothies of stone and slate. They are not ruined and are in agricultural use.

SOURCES

Primary

Gwent Record Office:

1793 Sale Particulars (D412.0038)

1802 Deed (D412.0045)

1856 Conveyance map (D412.0073)

National Library of Wales:

Tour 1780, including two sketches of grotto (MS 15, 172D, pp. 67-77).

Tour 1800, Revd John Trevennan (Facs 501, pp. 55-6).

John Smith wash sketch 1791 of Lover's Leap (Drawings vol. 76 no. 27).

Watercolour views 1802 (Drawings vol. 91 ff. 13, 15).

Watercolour view c. 1809 (Ms 6477c p. 93-7)

Secondary

The Gentleman's Magazine, March 1805, p. 236

Gilpin, W., Observations on the River Wye (1800)

Whateley, T., Observations on Modern Gardening (1771)

Marshall, W., Planting and Ornamental Gardening (1785)

Heath, C., A Descriptive Account of Persfield and Chepstow (1795)

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Coxe, W., Historical Tour through Monmouthshire (1804)

Fielding, C. and T.H., Picturesque Illustrations of the river Wye (1821)

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Waters, I., The Unfortunate Valentine Morris (1964)

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