

**PLAS GLYN-Y-MEL**

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| <b>Ref number</b>        | <b>PGW (Dy) 22 (PEM)</b>                                          |
| <b>OS Map</b>            | 157                                                               |
| <b>Grid ref</b>          | SM 9663 3697                                                      |
| <b>Former county</b>     | Dyfed                                                             |
| <b>Unitary authority</b> | Pembrokeshire                                                     |
| <b>Community council</b> | Fishguard and Goodwick                                            |
| <b>Designations</b>      | Listed building: House Grade II*<br>Conservation Area: Lower Town |
| <b>Site evaluation</b>   | <b>Grade II</b>                                                   |

**Primary reasons for grading** The home of Richard Fenton, barrister and author. Picturesque garden including walks cut into the cliff to the rear (north) of the house. Terraces and small garden surrounding the house and a river meadow flanking the Afon Gwaun.

**Type of site** Picturesque garden incorporating contrived cliff face with walks, small terraces and lawns.

**Main phase of construction** c. 1799 - 1805.

**Site description**

Plas Glyn-y-Mel is situated on the north bank of the Afon Gwaun at about 15m AOD. The mansion, now a private residence, is reached by a small lane called Glyn-y-Mel road, that leads to the west of the Lower Town (Cwm) of Fishguard. Situated in a valley bottom, there is steeply rising ground to the north and south and the configuration of the cliffs to the north, immediately to the rear of the house, are the work of Richard Fenton.

In his introduction to the second edition of Fenton's *Historical tour through Pembrokeshire*, Fenton's grandson, Farrar Fenton describes the preparations for the building of Plas Glyn-y-Mel. 'Being now a man in affluent circumstances, and wishing for a House of more commodious structure than the Ty Cwrt his predecessor had inhabited, he in that year (1799) fixed upon a meadow called Carn y Garth, in the Gwaen valley to build one, and at the same time to employ the people deprived of means of livelihood by the departure of the scadyn or sardine shoals. Much of the ground was covered by large blocks of rock which had fallen from the cliffs, so he began operations by drilling and blasting these into pieces and dressing the fragments into building stones for his intended mansion. To prepare a site for that he, by blasting operations, cut away the cliffs until he had formed a large alcove in which to place it, like a picture in a frame. This work turned out to involve enormous cost, for having cleared away the hill cliffs by blasting solid rock to the level of the valley, he discovered he had laid

bare a stratum of rotten slate which would not carry the structure he intended to place upon it. But with his usual tenacity of purpose he decided to open a deep trench and sink down until he reached the firm basaltic rock, which his knowledge of minerology (sic) taught him must be below. I have been informed by my father that he had to sink to thirty, and in parts to fifty feet, before he came to the substratum. When a bottom was found, he filled in the trenches with solid concrete of hydraulic lime and broken rock, and upon that laid his foundation'. Farrar Fenton then goes on to mention a little of the garden and tells a strange story connected with the laying of the foundation stone; all eventually ends well.

The structure that Fenton had wished to place 'like a picture in a frame' would have required good foundations. From the front, the house appears as a square, stone block, with a slate hipped roof and two chimney stacks. From the sides, the building appears less symmetrical, with extensions to the rear. There are in total four floors, three above ground level and a basement. In the centre of the front, south facing, elevation, reached by paired flights of steps from either side, is the square entrance portico and front door. This south-facing elevation is stone faced. Above the entrance portico is a Venetian style window, above which is an oval light. The rest of the upper floor windows are square headed; whilst the basement windows are round headed. Above is a hipped slate roof with two chimney stacks and the side and rear elevations are rendered. To the east is a small modern conservatory, behind which and partially built into the slope of the hill is a bathing pool that is also housed in a conservatory-like building.

The tithe map and schedule of apportionments records that John Fenton, Richard's son, owned at least ten further dwellings in the Lower Town totalling some 23 acres. The property of Glyn-y-Mel is recorded as 16.2 acres, of which 1 acre was taken up with outhouses and yard. There also appears to be a small square building to the front (south) of the house. By the 1889 survey, at least two of the outhouses have disappeared, being replaced by glasshouses in what appears to be a newly created walled garden. From the mapped evidence, therefore, it seems unlikely that any of the original outbuildings have survived.

The house and gardens are approached by a narrow lane that presumably was named after the property. The entrance is marked by a set of gates, past which the drive opens up to the gravel forecourt to the front (south) of the house. To the south is a lawn area that is separated from the meadow by a retaining wall. To the east are further lawned areas that were obviously planted with exotic and somewhat tender species. Behind and to the north of both the house and these lawns is the cliff face, with its picturesque walks, small pond and naturalistic niches or grottos.

Farrar Fenton suggests that these gardens were very important to his grandfather saying: 'Having the imagination of a poet, and the eye of an artist, whilst these operations (site clearance) were proceeding, he laid out plantations and gardens, and collected not only the ordinary trees and plants of Wales, but collected from relatives and friends in the military and naval service, seeds and saplings of foreign ones to acclimatize in the Paradise he was making'. The account goes on to mention that the Mexican Aloe (sic) was grown in the open, as was the Hymalayan (sic) Bamboo; figs and oranges grew outside as did the eucalyptus. Also 'on the rocky terraces behind the mansion he planted the celebrate Red Hermitage Vines, and lived to see them produce wine equal to the same stock in France'. Later he mentions that 'Fig-trees grew to the stature of oaks, and oranges to that of apple trees. The cost of these works many times exceeded the estimates of himself and his contractors from first to last, but here, as in all things, no cost or labour to himself or others could turn him from a purpose once begun, and in the end he produced a Home seated amid a Paradise of Landscape culture such as he had

dreamed over in reading the Italian Poets Ariosto and Tasso, or his equally loved countrymen Spenser, in the "Faery Queen", or in Thomson's "Castle of Indolence". Little except the hard landscaping remains of Fenton's 'Paradise' and there have been alterations and additions to this between c. 1830 and 1889.

To the south of the gravel forecourt is a small shrub and herbaceous border, to the south of which is an area of lawn. This is separated from the meadow to the south by a dry-stone retaining wall standing to just under 2m. Within the meadow, which is just under 3.5 acres, are mature lime trees, but little else of horticultural interest. Beyond the meadow is the Afon Gwaun which is to the northern side of the valley at this point.

The drive continues from the forecourt of the house towards the east; to either side is lawn in which shrubs and trees have been planted and are just surviving the trampling of horses. Delimiting this garden area to the east is a boundary that is constructed of immense quartz boulders, some almost 1.5m high. The path leads through a modern gate to an area that appears to be intended as less formal. To the east again, the path forks and the northern route leads to the cliff walks and Pwll Dyfrig.

The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map shows the northern fork traversing the slope at a 45° angle before it becomes a perimeter path above the cliffs; this path leads westwards back towards the house before a winding descent immediately to the west of the house. In addition to this path there are a series of narrow contour paths across the cliff face, some cut with care and imagination. For example, there is a 'squeeze' cut into the bedrock just prior to Pwll Dyfrig, where the actual path is reduced to just over 0.5m; the rock splays to either side being slightly wider. Along sections of all these small paths are retaining walls either above or below to ensure stability.

Elsewhere on the cliff face are small niches or grottos cut into the rock. One is quite large, about 3m high x 2m wide and 1.5 - 2m deep, to the east side is a small section of dry-stone walling that ensures the rock above remains stable. This niche would not only have provided shelter but also afforded views of the river and the hillside beyond. All the early surveys refer to these cliffs as being the 'site of St Dubricus's Cell'. Bearing in mind the amount of blasting that Fenton had undertaken, it is unlikely that the 'cell' still exists and there is no evidence of natural erosion associated with the one described above. However, Fenton may well have re-created a picturesque cell; this would be in keeping with his love of history and his 'poet's imagination'.

At SN 9678 3709 is the small, oval shaped sheet of water referred to as Pwll Dyfrig which covered about 0.138 acres and measures 18 x 7m. On the southern, downslope side is an earthwork bunding that stands to just under 0.75m. This little pond, which may have been created during the initial works, is much silted but still holds water. Bearing in mind the exotic plants that his grandson suggests were grown, not only in the gardens but also on this outcrop, the pond may have been used as a source of water as well providing an attractive feature.

Sadly, the cliff is now much overgrown with laurels and towards the top, flatter area, brambles and native trees have invaded; there is little left to suggest its former glory..

The tithe map gives no indication that a walled kitchen garden existed at that time and the general configuration of the boundaries are rather different to those recorded in on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance survey map of 1889. However, this map records a small rectangular walled garden to the south-west of the house, on the flatter meadow land. Within the garden were three areas of glass, a perimeter path with two linking paths and various outbuildings. Today, much of this area is under car park, while one of the outbuildings has become an exhibition centre and

studio. Sections of the wall to the north and south still remain, but there is little to indicate their original function.

## **Sources**

### **Primary**

Tithe map and schedule of apportionments, (c. 1840), nos 1043, 1045.

### **Secondary**

*Country Life* (September 18, 1975).

Fenton F, 'The life of Richard Fenton', *Historical tour through Pembrokeshire*, (1903, second edition), pp. xxxv - xxxvii.

Whittle E, *The historic gardens of Wales* (1992), p 55.