

## **COLWYN BAY: THE FLAGSTAFF (WELSH MOUNTAIN ZOO)**

**Ref No** PGW(Gd)61(CON)

**Former Ref No** PGW(C)69

**OS Map** 116

**Grid Ref** SH 837 788

**Former County** Clwyd

**Unitary Authority** Conwy

**Community Council** Colwyn Bay

**Designations** None

**Site Evaluation** Grade II

### **Primary reasons for grading**

Partial remains of formal and informal gardens laid out by T.H. Mawson in 1898-99 on fine site overlooking Colwyn Bay.

### **Type of Site**

Formal terraced garden; informal woodland garden.

### **Main Phases of Construction**

1898-99

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

The Flagstaff, now occupied by the Welsh Mountain Zoo, is a 37-acre estate situated on high ground above Colwyn Bay. At the end of the nineteenth century the land was purchased by a Manchester surgeon, Dr Walter Whitehead, who commissioned the architect Dan Gibson to design a house and the landscape architect Thomas Mawson to lay out the gardens. The gardens were made in 1898-99, along with the gatehouse, outbuildings, and glasshouses. But the grand mansion planned was never built, and Whitehead lived in retirement in the gatehouse. This is situated on the south side of the gardens, next to the Mochdre road. It is a two-storey half-timbered and rendered building, in vernacular style, with a central arch and mullioned windows. It is now used for zoo offices. The house was to have been situated between the east range of outbuildings and the present rockery pools to the north.

Running northwards from the gatehouse, on either side of a central gravelled former drive are ranges of stone outbuildings and yards. The glasshouses lie on the eastern side of the east range. The yard walls are high, with heavy stone coping and balls over arched doorways.

The gardens occupy a spectacular site on high ground at the southern edge of the town of Colwyn Bay, with extensive views from the highest part on the western side over Colwyn Bay and westwards. The gatehouse, outbuildings and formal gardens occupy a high plateau in the south-western part of the garden. To the east and north the ground drops steeply, and this area is occupied by extensive woodland of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. To the north-west of the formal gardens is the highest point in the estate, a grassy knoll the top of which is now occupied by the Flagstaff bistro and bar. Since 1963 the gardens have been home to the Welsh Mountain Zoo, and have been overlain by zoo structures, particularly in the upper formal part, where many animal and bird cages have been built, and a car park made on the western side. However, enough of the fabric remains to be able to discern the general layout.

A drawing of the proposed layout of the gardens by Thomas Mawson shows formal compartments to the south and east of the house, laid out with simple rectilinear beds, walls, and glasshouse ranges. Some of the paths, terraces, walls, and all the glasshouses remain. The woodland was developed with walks, and the three main existing paths are by Mawson. The gardens were altered after Walter Whitehead's day, in particular in the 1930s, when the rockery and water garden were made, and a pond built near the present main entrance (now gone). One feature from Dr Whitehead's time that has completely disappeared, and whose location is not known, is a garden building known as 'the shanty', seen in a contemporary photograph.

The original entrance (now exit), besides the gatehouse, was at the south-east corner of the estate, off the road leading down into the town. On the north side of the entrance is a small, simple rendered lodge with tall chimneys similar to those of the gatehouse. Square stone piers topped by stone hemispheres are set into the stone boundary wall. Inside the entrance the drive is rock-cut on its west side. It winds up through the woodland to a gateway with iron gates flanked by similar piers and hemispheres to those at the entrance. It then continues up through the woodland, curving around the slope to the present car park and to the outbuildings and gatehouse. The present main entrance is off the Mochdre road, to the east of the gatehouse, and was made for the zoo in 1963. This runs northwards to the main drive.

The main area of formal gardens lies to the east and north-east of the outbuildings. The original glasshouse lies on the east side of the east range of outbuildings. It is a lean-to glasshouse with two small extensions projecting eastwards. Originally there were vineries and peach cases extending eastwards where the reptile house and alligator beach are now. To the east of the glasshouse is a rectangular garden compartment bounded on the south by the substantial castellated stone boundary wall. This is now laid out with a lawn and central circular gravel area (tortoises), probably not the original layout. In the south-east corner is a small stone pavilion with a pitched roof and arched entrance set into the boundary wall. To the east is a side entrance, with castellated piers.

At the east end of the reptile house is a fine gateway with square stone piers topped by large stone balls. The path running northwards from here is an original axis of the garden. It descends via two flights of stone steps to the northern end of the formal garden. To its west is a rockery area, with informal paths through pine woodland,

created in the 1930s. To its east are a series of terraces on a north-south axis. At the southern end is a small terrace (monkeys) backed by a stone wall. Central stone steps flanked by clipped hollies lead down to the main terrace, which was originally laid out with lawn tennis courts. This is rectangular, now a lawn with gravel perimeter and central east-west paths. At the west end of the central path stone steps lead up to the main north-south axial path. The terrace is built up over the slope, with a high revetment wall, projecting up as a low parapet wall, along the east side. In the middle of this side is an apsidal projection (below which is the bear pit). At the north end stone steps flanked by clipped hollies lead to a small slightly higher terrace, the sundial garden. This is a rectangular garden surrounded by a low wall, and laid out with flagstone paths in a diamond within a square pattern. It is surrounded by clipped golden box hedges, and the flowerbeds contain golden-flowered bedding plants. In the middle is a faceted baluster sundial. To the north is an area of pine trees.

The rockery garden to the west is extensive, built on a small knoll and its west-facing slope in the 1930s. The trees are mainly conifers, and in particular pines. A water garden, with a small artificial stream dropping through a series of pools lies near the north end. It has much limestone rockwork, with a small stone bridge near the top.

To the west of the water garden, next to the car park, is an isolated pergola of four circular stone columns on a slightly raised flagstone base, and a top of wooden beams. Beneath it is a stone seat with a back, and sculptured sides in the form of griffins. The car park, made for the zoo in the 1960s, replaced an extension of the drive, an area of pines, and a field.

At the north end of the car park, to the north-west of the pergola, a curving flagstone path leads south-westwards to a sunken oval feature, originally a bowling green (now sea lions). In a small triangular lawn to the south of the path is a well, an original feature of the gardens. It has a circular stone surround standing on an octagonal stone base, with an iron superstructure. A stone in the grass is inscribed 'Ye Olde Wishing Well/Rest awhile and wish awhile'. The path leads to fine stone steps flanked by parapet walls topped by three stone balls (one missing at the top), which descend to the former bowling green, now a shallow concrete-lined pool for the sea lions. Just to the north is a small Gorsedd circle on a knoll, erected in 1909, from which there are panoramic views to the west and north. This is also an original feature, installed by Walter Whitehead. The high ground to the north, from which there are very fine views, is now occupied by zoo buildings. Below the sea lion pool is a smaller pool, now the flamingo pool. Originally there was a swimming pool here.

The informal woodland occupies the eastern half of the garden, on ground sloping steeply to the north-east. The woodland is mixed deciduous and coniferous, with some tall pines, and much of it is undisturbed by zoo installations. There are a number of original winding paths through the area, access to which is off the two drives. (Some of the nature trail paths were made by the zoo.) One path leads from the southern end of the main terrace into the woodland below.

## Sources

**Secondary**

Mawson, T.H., The Art and Craft of Garden Making (1907, 3rd edition), pp. 120, 129.

Hubbard, E., Clwyd (1986), p. 141.

Ottewill, D., The Edwardian Garden (1989), p. 171.

The Welsh Mountain Zoo (Guidebook).