

ABERCYNRIG

Ref No	PGW (Po) 15 (POW)
OS Map	160
Grid Ref	SO 069 271
Former County	Powys
District	Brecknockshire
Unitary authority	Powys
Community Council	Llanfrynach
Designations	Listed building: Abercynrig Grade II*
Site Evaluation	II
Primary reasons for grading	The preservation of a series of formal walled garden enclosures, ponds and water channels around a fine late seventeenth-century house, situated in an outstandingly unspoilt valley.
Main Phases of Construction	Late seventeenth century

SITE DESCRIPTION

Abercynrig is a well preserved, largely unaltered late seventeenth-century manor house situated on the south side of the Usk valley, a few kilometres east of Brecon. To its west the Afon Cynrig flows northwards to join the Usk just north-west of the house. West of the Afon Cynrig the ground rises steeply to the Cefn Cantref ridge. The house is reached down a half-kilometre private road from the south, giving it an atmosphere of great seclusion.

Abercynrig is a two-storey, four-bay symmetrical house of rendered stone with a steeply pitched, hipped stone roof with swept eaves and dormer windows on the west side. The main entrance is a single-storey projecting porch in the middle of the east side. This is flanked by slightly projecting wings to the north and south. The windows, now sashed, were formerly mullioned and transomed. To the south a single-storey stone extension joins the main building to the Granary, a two-storey stone building with a pitched slate roof, aligned east-west. This has small mullioned windows and modern dormers in the roof.

The earliest house on the site was probably built by the Aubrey family in the thirteenth century. By the fourteenth century the family, first recorded in Brecon, has risen to local prominence and during the sixteenth century Dr William Aubrey (circa 1529-95) rose to national prominence as an intellectual and lawyer. He was MP for Carmarthen in 1554, Brecon in 1558 and his great wealth enabled him greatly to increase his estates. Within

the present house there are traces of an earlier, sixteenth-century one that was probably built by Dr Aubrey. The antiquary John Aubrey, in Brief Lives, states that Dr Aubrey, his great grandfather, bought Abercynrig from an Aubrey cousin and that he built the 'great house at Brecknock: his study looks on the river Usk. He could ride nine miles together on his own land in Breconshire'. After his death the family declined rapidly in prosperity, his grandson Sir William Aubrey, of Tredomen, finally squandering the entire fortune. This forced the sale of Abercynrig in 1621 to Jeffrey Jeffreys, a prosperous mercer of Brecon. By 1651 the Jeffreys family had bought all the Abercynrig lands.

The present house was built by a member of the Jeffreys family, probably Colonel John Jeffreys, in the 1680s and apart from the insertion of sash windows in the nineteenth century has been little altered. It retains its seventeenth-century woodwork, fireplaces and staircases, with contemporary painted panels over the main fireplaces depicting the story of Diana and Actaeon. The Granary is probably contemporary, possibly retaining earlier elements. In the wall between the house and the Granary is a Tudor doorway from the earlier house. The joining extension was built in the 1930s and the doorway inserted then.

In the early eighteenth century Abercynrig passed through marriage to an Irishman, Thomas Flower. His descendant, William, 3rd Viscount Ashbrook, sold Abercynrig in 1800 to John Lloyd, of Dinas, Llanwrtyd (died 1818). John Lloyd had made his fortune in the East India Company. He built a new family home, Dinas, Brecon, which was not occupied until 1828, and lived at Old Oak House, Brecon. Dinas became the chief Lloyd seat and Abercynrig was tenanted until 1941, when it was requisitioned and Sir John Conway Lloyd went to live first at The Granary and then in the house itself. During the 1920s and 30s Abercynrig had been lived in by Captain D'Arcy Hall, who converted the Granary into a playroom and built the joining extension, then a servants' hall, now a dining room. The present owner is Sir John Lloyd's only surviving son.

To the east of the house is a complex of well preserved old stone farm buildings arranged around a grass and tarmac yard. The entrance is on the west side, with the former stables to its south and a fine arcaded former cider mill, complete with millstones, to its north. A large stone barn occupies the north side, with a smaller barn incorporating a small dovecote in the north-east corner. A further large barn with central projecting porch lies on the east side, with a single-storey shed projecting into the yard to its south. To the south the remainder of the east side and all the south side are enclosed by stone walls.

The garden lies on level ground mainly to the north, south and east of the house. It is divided into several walled compartments, with a separate walled garden to the north and a more informal area of ponds, trees and shrubs at the south end. The private road, lined with oak, sycamore and ash, approaches from the south and enters the grounds at a simple white-painted gate. The tarmac drive then continues northwards, flanked on the west by a low rubble wall, curving slightly to the east, and on the east by a small stream in a narrow channel, which runs out of a culvert under a stone wall to the east of the gate. The drive runs past an attractive field with alders and former watercourses and then the ponds, on the west, to a small forecourt to the south-east of the house. A branch leads eastwards from here to the entrance to the farm yard. The forecourt is tarmacked,

with a small central grass strip and flanking grass. It is bounded on the north and south by stone walls, the northern one being the south wall of the lawn in front of the house. The stream emerges from under the south wall, runs west for a short distance and then is culverted under the drive. Ferns and bamboos grow next to it. A flight of five stone steps leads from the south side of the forecourt up to the larger pond. An iron gate at the west end of the south wall gives access to a flagstone path along the east side of the house, which leads to the front door.

In front of the east side of the house is a rectangular lawn. Along its north and south sides the ground is raised, probably indicating former raised walks. The lawn is bounded by rubble stone walls; that on the east side has been reduced to ground level and now forms a revetment to a narrow water channel on its outside. A concrete bridge with a stone top and steps on the east side leads over the channel. The water runs from the south into a culvert at the north end of the wall. The south wall is low, flat topped and partly a revetment wall, with a simple iron gate at its west end. The north wall is similar, the north-east corner curved, with some cobbling inside it. In the middle of the lawn is a large, sprawling mulberry tree and on the south side are yew, lilac and laburnum. A holly and pine are planted on the eastern edge of the lawn and a walnut tree and large yew stand in the south-east corner. On the north side a pine is planted against the wall. To the east of the water channel is a sloping lawn leading up to the farm buildings. This is walled on the north, east and part of the south side, with a modern gate through to the grass walk on the west side. It is planted informally with pines, three large sycamores, a fir, a horse chestnut and two cherry trees.

On the west side of the house is a rectangular lawn, with a narrow border against the house and another on the west side, which is bounded by a very low wall and iron fencing. Beyond is an alder-fringed field which used to contain a tennis court. A purple beech indicates a small amount of ornamental planting. The north wall of the east lawn continues westwards to enclose the west lawn and then continues further westwards for a short distance. It also encloses the south side of a wide grass walk running from the east end of the east lawn westwards beyond the garden to the Afon Cynrig. To the north of the walk, opposite the lawns, is a large walled garden. The walls are circa 0.8-1.6 m high, built of roughly coursed rubble stone with flat coping. The north wall is slightly battered, banked up on the inside, with a thorn hedge on top. The north-west corner is rounded. The west side is uneven in height. Part of the south side has recently fallen and at the east end is a wide field gate. In the middle of this side is a wooden door flanked by higher walls, with a flat, double-slabbled lintel. The interior is now pasture, with a few fruit trees on the west side and a large cherry tree in the south-west corner. In the north-east corner is the brick base of a modern glasshouse.

The ponds occupy the southern end of the garden, to the west of the drive. The first, southernmost one is small and circular, with an earthen dam on the north side and fed from a culvert on the east side. Water leaves under a low, stone-topped sluice with a channel in the middle and runs in a channel to the second pond to the north. This is a much larger, informal pond, widening at the north end and with a small island in the middle. It has a raised bank or walk on the west side and a dam along the north side. The pond has lilies and irises growing in it and is fringed by lawns planted with ornamental trees, including oak, yew, birch, weeping willow, bamboo and Gunnera manicata. The island is planted with a copper beech and yew.

The lawn continues westwards, bounded on the south by iron fencing on a stone footing. It has a boggy channel running down the centre and is planted with good specimen trees, including a huge oak and sweet chestnuts. An old, dry water channel runs along the west boundary. An iron gate in the north side leads through to the rose garden.

The rose garden is a rectangular walled compartment bounded by roughly coursed rubble stone walls with flat coping remaining in places. The west wall has a blocked doorway in the middle. The garden is laid out to lawn with a circle in the middle divided into eight segmental rose beds by radiating narrow flagstone paths and with a similar path around the perimeter. In the centre is a circular well surrounded by a low wall of large stones. Water flows into the well from the east. Along the east and north sides of the garden are borders bounded by a flagstone paths. On the south side is a raised flagstone platform, with a curving front, in front of a large sycamore next to the entrance gate, which is flanked by cones of golden yew. In the south-west corner are the stone walls of the ruined malt house. This is a small square building, with a large gap on the east side, a low platform in the south-west corner and three brick-lined arches on the north side, the central one being wider than those flanking it. A large former ceiling beam remains across the interior and some flagstone flooring is visible. A wisteria has been trained up the south wall. Outside the north wall is a flight of stone steps up to a platform at garden wall height. The purpose of the platform is unclear; it may originally have been connected with the malt house but appears to have been a garden feature at some stage, perhaps a look-out platform. A narrow flagstone path leads to the steps and another to the north leads to a narrow gap in the north wall of the garden. In the lawn to the north of the rose beds is a sundial made out of a piece of worn carved stone on a separate base of two stones, one rough and one moulded. The decorative stones have the appearance of having come from a mediaeval ecclesiastical building. On top is a circular slab with a modern gnomon cemented on to it. There is an exit from the garden in the north-east corner, between yew hedges clipped into narrow pillars on either side of the exit.

A small iron gate leads to a small yew-hedged cobbled enclosure with a clump of flag irises in the middle. On the north side is a gap leading to a small service yard on the west side of the house, with steps up the west end of the Granary. On the east side a gap between yew pillars leads to a path along the south side of the Granary. To the south of this is a small enclosure, surrounded by low, flat-topped walls, reached by a simple iron gate in the middle of the north side. The garden is lawned, with narrow borders around the edge. Just inside the gate is an area of cobbling.

The garden probably has its origins in the late seventeenth century, when the present house was built. Stylistically, the walled enclosures could be of this date, or even earlier. The first evidence for a garden is in a survey of 1749 by Meredith Jones for the Rt Hon. Henry Lord Castle Durrow. The plan and sketch of the house in this survey show a walled court to the east of the house, with trees in front of it, the walk to the north and the two large barns. The garden enclosures to the south of the house probably had utilitarian origins and were later converted to gardens. Much of the planting of the garden, the layout of the rose garden and possibly the removal of the east wall of the lawn in front of the house, were the work of Captain D'Arcy Hall in the 1920s and 30s.

Sources

Primary

'An Exact survey of part of the estate of the Rt Hon. Henry Lord Castle Durrow' 1749, by Meredith Jones. Private collection.

Secondary

Aubrey, J., Brief Lives (1982 edition, edited by R. Barber), p. 23.

Jones-Davies, J., Abercynrig (1972).