

## **ABERGWYNANT**

<b>Ref No</b>	PGW (Gd) 32 (GWY)
<b>OS Map</b>	124
<b>Grid Ref</b>	SH 678 175
<b>Former County</b>	Gwynedd
<b>Unitary Authority</b>	Gwynedd
<b>Community Council</b>	Arthog
<b>Designations</b> (woods above house).	Snowdonia National Park, Site of Special Scientific Interest
<b>Site Evaluation</b>	<b>Grade II</b>

**Primary reasons for grading** A small nineteenth-century garden and park with kitchen garden and outbuildings which seems to have been laid out all at one time and to have been little altered since.

**Type of Site** Woods, parkland, lawn and wilderness, walled kitchen garden and small orchard.

**Main Phases of Construction** Probably mid nineteenth century.

### **SITE DESCRIPTION**

Abergwynant lies to the west of Dolgellau on the south side of the Mawddach valley. At this point there is a ridge, breached by a stream (the Gwynant), on the immediate south of the estuary, and on the landward side of this is a low-lying area north of the main slope of the valley side. Abergwynant and its farm occupy most of this relatively level, sheltered site, and the house, which lies near the bottom of the landward slope of the ridge, faces south-east and has a view down over its garden and then up to the hills south of the valley-side. It is a solid, gabled, Victorian-looking house, built of grey stone on a square plan, with large chimney-stacks and extravagantly decorated barge-boards. It has two storeys, with attics, and there is a large bay near the south corner, facing south-east. The main entrance, on the north-west, has a porch with a wide arch and a tiled floor. Over the arch is a crest of a hand and sword and the motto 'Be wary'. Externally plain except for the barge-boards, the house has some good internal features, including a painted ceiling, and is currently being completely restored. It was reputedly built by Sir Hugh Bunbury for Sir Robert Peel, who died in 1850, but information about Peel's connections with this area has proved elusive. Later the property belonged to the Richards-Peel family.

The house was sold and became a hotel in 1951, and remained so until 1992. The conservatory on the east corner was added during this period to enlarge the dining room, but the smaller one on the south corner is probably original. After 1992 the house lay empty until recently. When the restoration is complete, it will once more open as a hotel.

The current parking area more or less corresponds with the courtyard in front of the entrance shown on the second edition 25-in. Ordnance Survey map, and is gravelled, with a low wall with slate slab coping. There is a dressed stone block with an iron loop near this wall, probably moved from elsewhere.

The stable buildings and yard are probably contemporary with the house and garden, but are squeezed into a rather small corner north-east of the kitchen garden, which creates a yard and layout of an awkward shape. The yard is roughly triangular, with evidence of several contemporary or successive surfaces - cobbles, slate paving, rough gravel - and on the south-west is a row of cottages, on the east the coach house, and on the north what may have been the stable building.

All the buildings are of stone with slate roofs, and a stone wall links them to enclose the yard. There is a wide gateway on the south-east, from which the original gates are missing. The coach house seems little altered, but the building on the north side of the yard which may once have been stables now has a central door with a continuous row of windows either side, ten in all. Another possibility is that part of the row of cottages was once stables: there is a house, probably the gardener's, at the south-east end of the row and then three small, practically identical, holiday cottages which may well have been converted from stables.

To the north of the house is a small yard, which seems to have been subject to some alterations. Basically, there is a small, irregularly-shaped yard containing small sheds and outbuildings, reached from the drive by double wooden doors in an archway, with splayed dwarf walls either side of the approach. The old map shows two long ranges of outbuildings here, of which at least one has been demolished, just leaving a chimney sprouting out of the drive wall near the garden door. The other range also appears to have been modified. The buildings here were probably originally various domestic offices, but now seem to consist only of casual store sheds; the area is currently in use as a builder's yard during the refurbishment of the house.

The garden door is through an extension of the wall of this yard, which seems to have no purpose other than to frame the door, which is square-topped and wooden, with a slate stone lintel over it. The wall itself is mortared, and built of flattish slabs mixed with natural, unshaped stone.

The greater part of the park, to the north, alongside the Mawddach estuary, is hilly and wooded, on the riverside ridge. The home farm lies on level ground to the south-west, beyond the Afon Gwynant, and on the east of the river is a small area of gently sloping open parkland. The house is on the north-eastern edge of this, where it meets the woodland, located on a flattish shelf at the foot of the steeper part of the wooded ridge, with a small valley either side, to north-west and

south-east. The north-western valley is occupied by the kitchen gardens and stable-yard. Just beyond the south-west end of the kitchen garden is a stone building which is said to have been a chapel and to have a seventeenth-century date stone. This has a porch on the south-east end and a lean-to building against the north-east side, and is now in agricultural use.

The south-eastern valley is taken up by woods and a large fishpond. This is clearly not natural, being retained by a dam across its small valley. The outflow runs underground to the garden area or wilderness, where it is put to good use before disappearing underground again, and eventually joining the Afon Gwynant. There was a boathouse at one time, as well as a path all round the pond, but any remains of either of these features are obscured by the encroaching woodland. Only the dammed side, facing on to parkland, remains open.

Where the valleys open out is the parkland, with the garden area in the middle, immediately to the south of the house. The house is thus surrounded by its garden and park and backed by woods, but in fact lies towards the south corner of the park, the larger, wooded area being to the north, east and west.

The woodland to the north has an extensive network of paths and rides, many now becoming overgrown but until recently offering literally miles of recreational routes. The woodland on the slope up from the edge of the Mawddach estuary is ancient oak woodland, now designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. According to old 25-in. maps, this had far fewer conifers added to it than the main area higher up the ridge and on the south-east side of it. What there were have now mostly disappeared, as have many from the rest of the woodland, which, however, retains its underplanting of rhododendron. The Cambrian Railway (now disused) ran along the shore of the Mawddach, at the edge of the woods, cutting off the park from the estuary, but the river is not visible from the house and the presence of the estuary at this point was clearly never one of the aesthetic attractions of the site, although there is an attractive view to the west of its lower reaches. The railway may have been already present when the house was built.

South of the woods, the parkland is still easily recognisable as such, and the area immediately south-east of the house retains a number of specimen trees. This area has rocky outcrops and has probably not been ploughed, although the rest has. Further east is a large artificial fish-pond, which once had a boat house, and more woods fill the long triangle north-east of this, between the main drive and the A 493.

There is one main drive, always the principal approach, which begins to the north-east, where there is a lodge. This is single-storey, built of the same grey stone as the house and is probably contemporary. The entrance gateposts are of roughly-dressed stone and are large, square-sectioned and solid, with pyramidal caps built in three courses. The gates have gone. The drive curves to approach from the east, finally coming round the north-east and north-west sides of the house to the main entrance. There is then a fairly sharp bend back to the north and down a slope to the stables.

A second drive, from the farm, now disused and grass-surfaced but still clearly visible, runs

across a bridge over the Gwynant and through the park, skirting the garden on the south, to join the main drive near the fish-pond. A branch of this also skirts the west side of the garden, forking again near the kitchen garden and one route skirting this on the south-west to join a track in the woods, while the other runs north-east back to the stables. This drive would have offered the quickest approach to the house if coming from the west, although it goes practically through the farmyard. In the triangle of parkland with trees south-east of the house there seems to be a trace of another drive or track, parallel with this part of the second one, which presumably must be older as it is not shown on the old Ordnance Survey maps.

The garden, woods and parkland all appear to be contemporary, and are stylistically compatible with a mid nineteenth-century date, as suggested for the house. From maps it is clear that the present layout is close to that of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, and as it is stylistically Victorian it may well be original. During the time it was run as a hotel the gardens and parkland were maintained but little altered.

The garden area is fairly small, and consists largely of a shrubbery or 'wilderness', with a sloping lawn and a terrace around the house. The wilderness, which is given this designation on the second edition 25-in. Ordnance Survey map, is of course not in any modern sense wild, and has in fact an immensely complex and detailed design, thickly planted with shrubs and packed with surprises at every turn. There are many turns, as the path layout is intricate, and depends on the vegetation to screen nearby routes from one another; there is an equally intricate layout of water channels, supplied from the fish-pond in the park, which feeds the various water features.

From the house terrace, which has a small, probably original conservatory or sun-room facing south-east, the outlook is across the lawn to a small ornamental pond on the edge of the wilderness, with the park beyond on the east and the shrubs of the wilderness, mostly colourful varieties of rhododendron on this side, on the south. The pond is fed by a small waterfall on the far side.

Closer investigation of the wilderness, via paths leading off the lawn, reveals that this waterfall is supplied by an arched aqueduct, bringing water which has flowed underground from the park fish-pond; after leaving the ornamental pond, the water flows through a system of culverts and small streams, feeding a swimming pool and a fountain before disappearing underground again. The culverts themselves, crossed by numerous slate slab bridges, contribute to the atmosphere of the wilderness, and the gentle sound of running water is everywhere.

Large oaks clearly pre-dating the construction of the garden have been retained in places, and the planting is mostly of trees and shrubs, designed to provide a thick screen between the various paths and features of the wilderness, which are mostly not intervisible. There was clearly very little herbaceous planting, and almost none survives, but a formal area around the fountain has some beds edged with rope-twist tiles.

Below the house on the west and south-west is a further small area of lawn, and a levelled semi-circular area which was probably originally a viewpoint, giving a pleasant view down the

valley; the outlook is now completely obscured by a wall of yew, clearly planted as a hedge but allowed to grow too tall. Some of the trees planted below the viewpoint have also grown up into the picture, but they are sufficiently well spaced for the view still to be appreciated if the hedge were restored.

The main lawn slopes down to the south-east, and is uninterrupted by trees or groups of shrubs, but framed by these around the edges. A curved flight of steps leads down from the house terrace to this lawn, and three linked flights lead down to the south-west, to the viewpoint. Apart from this there is little formal structure, and the main interest of the garden centres on the wilderness.

The kitchen garden is probably contemporary with the house. The main part of the garden lies between the old chapel building and the stable-yard, to the north-west of the house. It is rectangular, stone-walled, with an internal cross wall dividing it into two parts, not quite halves. South-east of this, filling the space between the garden, the orchard and the drive to the stable-yard, is an extension, also walled, and nearly as large as the main garden. The catalogue from when the house was sold in 1951 mentions fruit trees and bushes, two large, heated greenhouses, one containing eight vines, a mushroom house, potting sheds and a boiler house.

The walls are all stone and average about 2 m high. They look fairly uniform, but those of the main garden are mortared and those of the extension dry-stone, though in some places they appear to be mortared on the inside. Both are built of flattish blocks chosen and shaped to produce a fairly neat face. The walls of the main garden have a flat slate coping, and those of the extension have the top course on edge. This slight difference in the walling, together with the fact that a gap has been made in the south-east wall of the main garden to give access to the extension, suggests that the latter may postdate the main garden slightly. The north-eastern end of the main garden consists of the back of a row of cottages which face the stable-yard; these have been converted to holiday units but the house on the south-east end of the row was probably the gardener's.

Access to the main garden at this end is via an entrance into the extension and then through a small gate in the south-east wall of the main garden. If the extension was added later, the small gate was presumably the original entrance. The gate is a replacement, but the gateway is original. The only other original doorway, with a wooden door still in situ, appears to be in the south-west wall, leading into the enclosure around the chapel building. An additional, wide entrance has been made through the south-east wall near the south corner, into the extension; this is now blocked with a field gate.

Apart from the gateway now used as the main entrance, which has modern wrought-iron gates, there is a doorway through the south-east wall of the garden extension, near the south corner, into the orchard area. The door now lies on the ground outside the wall. A gap has also been made through the south-west wall, near the south corner of the main garden, which has caused partial collapse of the wall; this has been repaired to a lower level than the rest of the wall. The gap is fairly wide and may have been made to permit ploughing of the garden extension; part of the main garden may also have

been ploughed as the gap near here into it is about the same width.

Alongside the stable drive, at the north-east end of the extension, is a row of potting sheds and small buildings; where the garden extension wall is their rear wall it is mortared, and there is a small window. The old 25-in map shows a small greenhouse nearby, but this has now disappeared, although a short cross-wall remains. A modern fence continuing the line of this wall now divides the extension. There is another, partially collapsed, cross-wall stub further along, which is not shown on the map.

In the main garden, there is a glasshouse built against the lowest terrace wall near the south-western end of the garden. It is in poor condition but is shown on the old map and is probably original. It is built on a brick base in lean-to shape, but as the terrace wall reaches to not much more than half its height, a stone wall to the full height of the glasshouse has been added to the top. Inside there are borders and a central path with rope-twist tile edging. The glasshouse contains a vine and a galvanised water tank.

A second, more recent, glasshouse (not shown on the old maps, but mentioned in the particulars of sale of 1951) lies to the south-east, free-standing in the middle of the level part of the garden. This too is built of timber on a brick base and is in reasonable condition, retaining much of its glazing, decorative ironwork, ventilation system etc. Internally there are raised and ground-level borders, wooden staging, sunken concrete water tanks and a central concrete path with decorative iron heating grilles.

South-west of the older greenhouse are the remains of a small semi-subterranean building, possibly the mushroom house, although as it is shown glazed on the old map it may originally have been a melon or pineapple pit. Some iron floor grilles and other decorative metalwork are stacked inside. There is now no sign of its heating system in situ, although lengths of piping lie about the garden, and there is no obvious boiler house.

The cross wall dividing the main garden is about the same height as the main garden walls and built in the same style. There are two archways through it (wider than doorways, and probably always without doors or gates), one near the south-east wall and one at the foot of the terraces on the north-west side. The terrace walls are again built in similar style, mortared with flat coping, and are around 0.5 m high; there are three terraces, although the old maps only show two, suggesting that the topmost one may have been added later, though they all appear contemporary. The terraces run the full length of the garden along the north-west side, both sides of the dividing wall, interrupted only by the glasshouse. There are slatestone slab steps of varying widths up on to the terraces either side of the cross wall and at either end of the glasshouse.

The main paths run north-east to south-west, two in the main garden, passing through the two arches in the cross wall, and two in the extension. There are also cross paths at the ends. All are now grassy, but feel fairly hard underfoot and may once have been gravelled. There are borders on the terraces, against the outside of the glasshouses, and along most of the walls of both the main garden and the extension. In the latter there is a raised border with a stone

retaining wall with slate coping against part of the wall of the main garden. Elsewhere the borders have stone revetting or are edged with slates, but almost all are grassed over and little planting remains, except for a few herbs and shrubs on the terraces. There is a tree paeony near the main entrance.

Most of the walls are wired for fruit trees, and some of these survive. There are also several free-standing fruit trees, and the stumps of more, in both parts of the garden and in the extension, some of which seem to have once been trained as espaliers. They include apples and cherries. There are one or two self-sown trees from the woodland behind, but mostly these have not been allowed to become established.

The orchard is presumably more or less contemporary with the rest of the gardens and park, but may have been added to the kitchen garden, with the extension of the latter, at a slightly later date.

The orchard is small and roughly triangular, filling the space between the kitchen garden, the drive to the stables, and the wilderness. It is thus walled on two sides, by the kitchen garden and wilderness walls, and enclosed on the third by the fence along the drive. It is now empty of trees and used as a paddock. There is a way through the orchard, alongside the kitchen garden wall, from the drive to the park, meeting the disused drive where it passes the south-west end of the kitchen garden, and until recently this was walled or fenced off from the orchard. It probably provided vehicular access to the stables.

## **Sources**

### **Primary**

Information from Mr and Mrs B Armstrong

Catalogue of sale in National Library, Aberystwyth (1951)