

PORTMEIRION

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 29 (GWY)
OS Map	124
Grid Ref	SH 589 372
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Gwynedd
Community Council	Penrhyndeudraeth
Designations	Listed buildings: Town Hall, Grade II*, 47 other buildings, all Grade II; Conservation Area
Site Evaluation	II*

Primary reasons for grading A well preserved garden designed in and around the village of Portmeirion by Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect of the village, where conditions permit the growing of many half-hardy and tender plants, which enhance the exotic character of the site. Attached is the older Gwyllt garden containing an outstanding rhododendron collection of the early twentieth century.

Type of Site Public and private village gardens, woodland garden with walks, both of particular interest to plantsmen.

Main Phases of Construction c. 1850; 1925 onwards

SITE DESCRIPTION

Portmeirion fills the mouth of a small valley on the north side of the Traeth Bach estuary, near Porthmadog; the Gwyllt gardens to the west of it occupy the southern part of the peninsula between this and the Traeth Mawr. The site is almost hidden from the landward side, to north and north-east, and is sheltered from this direction by the shape of the land, as is the village area from the west and south-west by the Gwyllt. The only exposed direction is the south-east and in this direction lie spectacular views, over the sands of the estuary towards Harlech, with its castle perched on a rock.

Clough Williams-Ellis had been looking for a suitable site in which to experiment with his ideas on architecture and landscape, and although he had an island in mind he knew, when he saw it, that Portmeirion was the place. Initially concentrating on the building of the village and the planting of the village gardens, he later also planted in the Gwyllt and added a few buildings, but since the creation of Portmeirion this area has always been treated as of

secondary importance. Attempts are now being made to restore the Gwyllt garden and increase public use of it so that its true value is appreciated.

Portmeirion is an atypical site in that it does not consist of a park and garden surrounding a house, but is a deliberately created village set in a garden. The village, built in and around a small valley opening on to the shore, consists of a hotel and cottages, with shops and public buildings, arranged around a central open square which is laid out as a public garden. It is of one period (mid twentieth century), but is stylistically diverse, incorporating architectural elements from a wide range of periods and from several countries. The garden area occupies most of the flat ground available and due to the steeply-sloping nature of the rest of the site most of the buildings are displayed to advantage on the hillside. For this reason the village is best viewed from the sea, whence the site was first seen by its creator, Clough Williams-Ellis; indeed, it is well hidden from the landward side. The best view from within the village is that from the hotel, a view deliberately contrived as the hotel was the original focus for visitors.

The buildings are a collection of architectural fantasies created by Williams-Ellis. Portmeirion is often described as 'Italianate', but this is neither an accurate nor a sufficient description. The style is in fact a mixture of many different elements which happened to appeal to Williams-Ellis, and some of the buildings, or parts of them, were imported from elsewhere and re-erected here. A 'Home for Fallen Buildings' was maintained, where architectural fragments and parts of buildings were kept until they could be incorporated into some new structure. The original mid-nineteenth century house, Aber-Ia, and its outbuildings were also retained and converted.

The surreal character of the village, from which much of its magic originates, is largely due to the buildings, but the luxuriant growth of plants, particularly flowering shrubs, completes the exotic atmosphere. The partly formal public garden in the centre of the village is an essential part of the layout, and although Williams-Ellis claimed that the village had no definite plan, it is clear that the designation of this area as open space was central to the whole scheme, and must have been decided on from the beginning. Originally it included a tennis court, but this was later moved, and subsequently the space it had occupied, the eastern half of the garden area, became known as the Piazza.

When Clough Williams-Ellis bought the site in 1925, he also acquired the mansion of Aber-Ia, which stood near the shore, to the south-west of the present village, and its pleasure grounds on the Gwyllt peninsula to the west. There was also a stable block and gardener's cottage, both located some way from the house, the former near the northern end and the latter west of centre of the present village. The leasehold had been offered for sale in 1861, and at that time there were flower and kitchen gardens (probably in the level area now occupied by the Piazza) as well as pleasure grounds with 'picturesque rocks and waterfalls'. The house was 'on a beautiful terrace overlooking the sea', and the views were a significant selling point. Nothing was said at this time of the interesting collection of rhododendrons in the Gwyllt garden, but there were already some specimens of good varieties; the collection was, however, considerably developed from early in the twentieth century until the site was sold in 1925. The last owners before Williams-Ellis, the Haighs, were particularly interested in exotic and tender rhododendrons, and a hybrid bred here by Caton Haigh received an Award of Merit from the Royal

Horticultural Society.

After Clough Williams-Ellis acquired the site there were two main periods of building; from 1925 until the Second World War, and after that war from 1954 until about 1970. The first period saw conversion of the old house to a hotel and the 'Cloughing-up' of the former gardener's cottage, now the Mermaid; the former stable building was also converted. The first new cottages were the Angel and Neptune, on the west side of the valley, opposite the Mermaid. Most of the buildings in the Citadel, the higher part of the village on the north-eastern edge of the valley, were also completed, including the Campanile. During the later period more buildings were added to the Citadel and around the central public garden, part of which was now known as the Piazza (this had originally been a tennis court, but, finding the wire obtrusive, Williams-Ellis had it moved). These include the Pantheon, with its dome complementing the Campanile, the Unicorn and Bridge House, on an arch over one of the streets. There is perhaps a greater emphasis on classical style in these later buildings, though the eclectic mixture was carefully preserved.

From the first the village had to contribute to its own upkeep and expansion, and the conversion of the old mansion to a hotel was the first move. Cottages, offering more accommodation, were built soon after, and although at first the clientele was mostly drawn from the Williams-Ellises' own circle, including many literary and artistic figures (Noel Coward, for instance, wrote *Blithe Spirit* at Portmeirion), it soon expanded, day visitors eventually forming a significant element. It is now one of the foremost tourist attractions in north Wales.

There are too many buildings to describe them all in detail, and the information is available elsewhere. However, those which can be truly considered garden buildings are described in the relevant section.

The village gardens

The village gardens, though incorporating some older trees, date in their present form from 1925 onwards. There is a partly formal central public garden and small individual gardens belonging to the cottages, most of which are private. All of these are linked together by planting alongside all the paths and in every spare piece of ground. This planting is based mainly on flowering and ornamental shrubs, which benefit from the very sheltered environment and the mild climate, so that an exotic effect is created of fantastic, surreal buildings rising from luxuriant swathes of flowers and foliage.

The centre of the village is occupied by a roughly square open area consisting of the Piazza, which is a tarmac-surfaced area with an apsidal pool, and a garden to the west of it, with another pool and a stream running through. These take up most of the level ground, and must be on the site of the original kitchen garden and any formal gardens associated with Aber-Ia. The main routes through the village run around the edges of the open space.

Although this area is much flatter than most of the rest of the site, to give completely level areas it has had to be terraced. The terraces are mostly fairly low, but on the south side, where the ground falls away, they are up to 1.3 m high. The slopes around range from fairly gentle to cliffs, and are criss-crossed by steps and paths leading to the various buildings.

The layout of the Piazza and garden area is very complex, with numerous architectural ornaments, buildings, several pools and varied planting, including palms, Irish yews, flowering shrubs and half-hardy plants. The effect overall is rather formal, but in detail the various elements and the planting tend to be quite informal in character. There is a vista along the centre, between the two parts of the area, from a pink-washed archway on the north to a statue on the south, and other views across the village are also emphasised by some architectural feature. The only domestic building within the open space is the Mermaid, formerly the gardener's house.

The Piazza has a large, shallow, formal pool with a fountain at the south end, and six formal beds around it. The pool has been created on top of the old hard surface of the tennis court, using low concrete walls around it. The interior is painted blue. There are many seats in and around the Piazza, one encircling a tree. Around the edges of the hard-surfaced area are borders, blending, on the east, into the foot of the slope leading up to the Citadel and higher part of the village. South-east of the pool, just beyond the edge of the Piazza, is a large colonnaded loggia, and, similarly placed outside the Piazza on the north, a small building called the Gloriette balances a gothic porch from Nerquis Hall, Flintshire, on the south.

Apart from the tarmac area there are smaller hard-surfaced areas, with concrete, cobbles or decorative paving of various kinds, the latter two occurring especially around ornamental features or in front of buildings. Most of the paths are tarmac-surfaced.

The garden area on the west also has a large pool, but much deeper than and quite different in character from the apsidal pool in the Piazza. It is oblong in shape and encircled by a stone parapet, with a small bridge at each end over the stream which feeds it, and then flows out and

down to the sea. This pool is a survivor from the gardens of Aber-Ia, and was originally constructed in the 1850s. There is planting in and around it, and borders along the edges of the lawns which surround it, but no island beds. In the north-west corner of the garden is a small concrete-paved viewing area with a parapet, looking out over the garden and Piazza.

Near the centre of the south side of the open area is a small circular pool with a fountain, known as the Wishing Well. South of the large pool is a tarmac-surfaced open space with a bronze statue known as Hercules, probably originally Atlas, carrying the world on his shoulders.

Along the western edge of the public garden runs the road to the hotel, the original drive to the house, flanked by mature trees, including sycamore, beech and a tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). The drive enters the village on the north. At this entrance there is a small parking or turning area backed by curving beech hedges, ornamented by statues and with a central urn on a stone-built base. There is also a fountain and a small stone seat.

Many of the houses and cottages have small private gardens, generally with lawns. These tend to be out of sight behind the buildings, but those which are visible have plantings of ornamental shrubs which link them with the public areas, maintaining a uniform character.

The garden of the Battery, in the Citadel, has cannons pointing out to sea, and seats, but little planting. A small lawn nearby with recent box edging contains a lone tree, and there is a clipped bay on another small lawn. From the tree there is a good view over the village centre.

There are further planted areas, mostly fairly small and irregular in shape, around the main public gardens in the centre of the village, on the parts of the valley side which are not built on, and alongside most of the paths. These are generally informally planted, mainly with ornamental shrubs, but again the planting firmly links them with the other garden areas within the village.

Leading south from the central garden is the road to the hotel, and almost parallel with this a long flight of steps on the same axis as the oval pool and the Atlas statue leads to a balustraded viewing area with stone seats. Situated above another small pool in the stream, this terrace gives a view over the estuary to Harlech and the mountains beyond. The stream runs down beside the steps, and the valley is luxuriantly planted with a wide variety of ornamental shrubs.

Below the viewing point is the level seafront area, with the hotel to the south-west and its main lawn, with an oval swimming pool, to the east. Immediately in front of the hotel is a quay, with more pavilions, and a concrete boat at the south end. A flagpole at the north end balances the masts of the ship. The quay is backed by a high, curved retaining wall, at the top of which is a small lawned terrace outside the hotel. The pavilions are built against this wall and the taller of the two just overtops it. There are two semi-circular and one triangular flowerbeds on the quay, and several seats; a slab-roofed tunnel from the quay gives access to the path to the Gwyllt, on the south-west. In the centre of the quay, which curves outwards, there are steps down to the water flanked by a pair of cannon.

To the east of the village is an area of woodland, called Coed Aber-Ia, which bounds and shelters the village on this side, and runs down to the sea, dropping very steeply near the shore. The wood is based on natural sessile oak woodland, but with nineteenth-century additions; in the upper storey these include pine, larch and sycamore. The understorey consists of holly, *Rhododendron ponticum* and laurel, except by the sea where the undergrowth is natural. There is a path from the village eastwards into these woods, but it is disused. The woodland extends south-westwards on the steep slope below the village and a path leads to a viewpoint at the top of the slope. Here there is a small building, reached through an archway in the stone wall which borders the village on this side. The building has something of the grotto about it, with shells and bottle glass set in the walls and ceiling, a cobbled floor, and window openings on the south side, towards the view. On the rear wall is mock fountain of dolphins with twisted tails over triple shell basins, and there is a stone-built bench seat with a slate surface. The roof supports a pole topped with a sphere.

The path descends through the wood to the lowest of three linked pavilions built on a projecting corner of the cliff. The pavilions are stuccoed, with pantiled roofs, and have several window and door openings; the lowest is open-fronted, with the roof supported on sturdy round columns. These pavilions form an important part of the view from the hotel and from them there are views out to sea and an internal view over gardens and the swimming pool towards the hotel. On the west side of the wall and pavilions the cliff is steeper and more rocky, without paths, and supports similar woodland, but less dense and more scrubby due to the rockier terrain.

The Gwylt garden

The Gwylt garden was the informal pleasure ground attached to the Victorian house at Aber-Ia, and was probably laid out when this was first built in the middle of the nineteenth century. The peninsula would have been clothed with oak woodland, and some of this was clearly retained, as many oaks survive to this day; but many other plants were added. The first additions were trees, especially pines and other conifers, some of which survive, and rhododendrons such as *R. nobleanum* and 'Cornish Red'. Unfortunately the rhododendron collection is not well documented, and it is not clear to what extent early plantings were intended to be the basis of a collection. The oldest plants are mostly pathside plantings, but they are concentrated in certain areas (*R. ponticum* being planted elsewhere as an ordinary evergreen), and there does seem to have been a particular interest on the part of the original owner, a Mr Westmacott.

The second phase of planting was in the early twentieth century. This was the heyday of the collection, when Caton Haigh deliberately collected half-hardy and exotic varieties, some recently introduced from China. Both Westmacott and Haigh also planted a variety of trees, and some from both periods survive; the range of ages amongst the trees suggests that Clough Williams-Ellis also planted some, but he undoubtedly concentrated mainly on the village itself.

The path layout is extensive and mostly original. During the time that Portmeirion was being developed, little alteration seems to have been made to the Gwylt. Williams-Ellis added two lighthouses on the sea edge and (probably) a pagoda near the centre, as well as a shelter and eye-catcher just north of the village, but otherwise seems to have been content to change little, and retain the old path system; nor does he seem to have undertaken much different

planting in this area, although some of the younger trees must have been planted by him. One or two paths have been added or altered recently for visitor convenience, and a few have been lost. The garden is now actively being restored and developed. The emphasis is on interesting planting, especially of exotic and tender subjects, taking advantage of the mild climate and the shelter offered by the large, old shrubs and trees, and picking up the original style of the garden; but other alterations, such as the creation of the ponds, have also been made, to increase the interest for visitors.

The garden occupies a roughly triangular area on the south of the peninsula, the geography of which is very steep and rocky, with several cliffs; the soil appears to be shallow and sandy. The rich vegetation disguises the unforgiving nature of the terrain, but it cannot have been easy to establish the first plantings in such a rocky and exposed spot, even with pre-existing natural woodland offering some shelter. This is undoubtedly the reason that the rhododendron collection is located in the north-east corner of the Gwyllt.

The long north side of the garden is a boundary wall separating it from heathland and farmland beyond; a similar wall runs north-north-east to south-south-west within the garden. These may be field walls pre-dating the original creation of the garden, but they look unusually well-built for such walls. Originally the planting extended beyond the northern wall, and in 1954 there was a path loop in this area, but this is no longer part of the garden. The wall dividing the garden follows, more or less, the lower part of a small stream, which has cut a fairly dramatic rocky valley, the upper part of which has now been dammed up to form the ponds. The northern part of the wall has been demolished.

The south-west side of the triangle mostly consists of a long, sandy beach and the south-east of rocky shore. One of the lighthouses, a square, three-storey building, is just south of the hotel along this shore, and the other, more like a traditional lighthouse, on the southernmost point. Near the western edge of the village, on a mound thought to be a medieval motte, is a circular gazebo in the style of a classical temple designed in 1983 by Susan Williams-Ellis in memory of her father. This is built of mock stone, with a domed fibreglass roof. It is open-sided, the roof being supported by slender columns linked by balustrading at the base. There are curved benches round the sides and a small circular table of the same mock stone. The floor appears to be real stone. There are also the ruins of several small stone structures, some of which may be Victorian garden buildings.

Near the centre of the garden is a pets' cemetery, relating to Aber-Ia but still in use, and east of this are the three ponds, with a pagoda, bridge and summer house. Nearby a picnic area and children's playground have also been added. Most of the interesting rhododendrons are north of the ponds. Pine and oak woodland, incorporating some groups of other trees such as eucalyptus and monkey puzzles, occupies most of the rest of the area, and the vegetation along the shores is mostly natural, consisting of scrubby woodland with gorse, blackthorn and other native plants.

The main ways into the Gwyllt garden are along the path from the hotel to the first lighthouse, which is wide, level and gravelled, and from the northern edge of the village, where the

paths are also gravelled and have stone edging. The continuation of the first path along the shore, past the first lighthouse, is stone-paved, eventually leading down on to the beach. Beyond this it is sandy-surfaced, and there is another access to the beach, over rocks, with a handrail made from old park fencing, near the second lighthouse. Most of the paths in the north-east corner of the garden and near the ponds are gravelled, some with stone edging. The rest of the paths tend to be stony, sandy or unsurfaced, but it is possible that old gravel surfaces lie underneath accumulated sand and leafmould on some of them, and some have remnants of stone edging, including quartz in places. Others are defined by ancient, and enormous, rhododendrons. Most of the main paths are levelled into the slope and revetted where necessary, and sometimes have walling or are cut into the rock on the uphill side, and several of them are very wide. These are clearly original Victorian paths, and most of the minor routes, some of which zig-zag up and down steep cliffs, are probably of the same date. One path incorporates a walk along part of the beach on the south-west side, and this too appears to be an old route; in 1954 it was called 'The Lane'. Comparison of maps shows that the path layout remains basically the same, although some minor routes have been lost, and some paths altered within the last 50 years; a few, including, obviously, some of those around the ponds, are new. Some smaller paths are not shown on any of the maps but even some of these have steps or are cut into the rock, and do not appear to be recent.

At various places along the routes there are viewpoints, without seats or buildings but commanding a particularly good view, often through gaps in the planting. Sometimes these are reached by a short detour from the path. These viewpoints too are probably mostly part of the original layout.

There are three ponds, which were created in the 1960s in the upper part of the valley of the little stream. Although there are still cliffs either side, the valley is wider here and was evidently already marshy in the bottom. The ponds were enlarged and deepened in the 1980s.

The two lower ponds are linked, and are narrow, sinuous and shallow, with marshy edges planted with marginal and waterside species. A bridge carries a path over the channel linking them, and near this is a pagoda, built of modern materials in the 1980s; at the top of the upper pond is a summer-house of similar date and materials. High-level paths along the cliffs both sides give good views over the area, which contains much new planting as well as established trees and shrubs.

The third pond is further to the north and is similar in character but more shaded by surrounding woodland; again there is luxuriant marginal planting. The gazebo is sited above this with a view over it.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mr R Sharpe, head gardener

Information from Mr R Williams-Ellis

Plant lists: Portmeirion gardeners' collection

A brief guide to the Portmeirion pleasure grounds: Woodland garden circuit, draft of a visitor guide: Portmeirion gardeners' collection

Secondary

Maps and visitor guides produced by the Portmeirion Foundation

Best, R, and Blount, A, *Portmeirion Peninsula: A New and Reliable Map of the Woodland Walks and Wild Garden*, 1954

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