

WERN ISAF (ROSEBRIERS)

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 9 (CON)
OS Map	115
Grid Ref	SH 686 751
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Conwy
Community Council	Llanfairfechan
Designations	Listed building: Wern Isaf Grade II*
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading An Arts-and-Crafts garden designed and laid out by the architect of the house, Herbert Luck North, contemporary with the house. The layout of terraces is carefully integrated with the plan of the house, thus giving a strong sense of unity to the whole.

Type of Site Arts-and-Crafts house and garden of about 1900, small but basically unchanged.

Main Phases of Construction 1900

SITE DESCRIPTION

Wern Isaf, formerly called Rosebriers, is an Arts-and-Crafts style house, designed and built for himself in 1900 by Herbert Luck North. It is situated in Penmaen Park on the eastern edge of Llanfairfechan, on a north-west-facing slope, looking out over the sea to Anglesey and Ynys Seiriol.

The house is two-storey, built of brick with granite detail, and rendered, and has a slate roof with a central chimney. The plan is unusual, based on an octagonal hall with a wing either side, and a single-storey domestic block attached on the south-east. The windows are large and numerous, tall, narrow sashes on the upper floor and casements below, and the door on the garden front is also glazed, giving a beautifully light interior.

H.L. North originally came from Llanfairfechan, but worked in London as a pupil of Henry Wilson and then for Edwin Lutyens and W.A. Pite at the end of the nineteenth century. He returned to Llanfairfechan with his family in 1901, when Rosebriers was complete, and set up his own practice in Conwy, working from offices there until 1906, after which he worked from home. In 1926 he took his son-in-law P.M. Padmore into partnership, and the partnership was

responsible for The Close housing estate in Llanfairfechan, as well as many other houses, churches, chapels and school buildings. North died at Rosebriers in 1941, and the house remains in the family.

Wern Isaf Bach lies to the north of Rosebriers, within the garden area, and is now separated from it by iron fencing, erected when the two properties were separately let. It was designed by North and built about in 1925. This chalet-style building housed the Norths' cook and gardener and their family. An integral garage on the south end has since been converted to a kitchen.

The elevated site about 0.5 km from the sea is subject to strong salt winds at times. Some protection is given by large oak trees, already mature when the house was built, which are remnants of the wood that occupied the site before building began. Without the oaks the location would be extremely exposed.

The garden is contemporary with the house, and was designed and laid out by the architect and original owner, Herbert Luck North. Its plan is well integrated with that of the house and the two form a satisfying unified whole. The garden is not large, but contains several different areas. The highest part, to the south-east, was designed as a wild garden, around several large oaks remaining on the site. Contrasting with this, two tiers of semi-hexagonal terraces, bounded by dry-stone walls, are laid out around the house. These had formal box-edged beds, and lawns. Between the formal and the informal were areas planted with shrubs, a tennis court, a stream and pond, and, north-east of the drive, a further area of shrubs with a rose pergola which gave the house its original name.

The house was rented out for a long period, the family residing elsewhere in Llanfairfechan, and during this time the garden suffered much neglect. The wild area received no maintenance for many years and became completely overgrown. The rose pergola was lost, the pond was altered and some of the original plantings died or grew out of control. Despite this, however, the original layout of the garden remained clear and when restoration recently began, it proved possible to rediscover or recreate most of the design. The present owner remembers the garden as it used to be when she visited it as a child, and using an original plan and her memory as guides is restoring it as nearly as possible to its original condition.

The gravel drive comes from the west around the north of the house to the parking/turning area north-east of it. The main gateway has simple stone posts and a white-painted iron gate, made of flat strips bolted together in a criss-cross design within a rectangular frame. There is also an unpainted iron gate between the drive and Wern Isaf Bach. Apart from this the only access to the site is by a stone stile over the stone boundary wall, at the end of the pergola path. There is also a small wooden pedestrian gate leading to Wern Isaf Bach in the north corner of the plot.

The house is scarped into the slope, and there are two terraces on the downhill (south-west) side, which echo the semi-hexagonal shape of the house. The upper is narrow, with paths and box-edged formal beds, and the lower wider, and lawned. Both terraces are bounded by low dry-stone revetment walls and are at their highest on the south-west, petering out to nothing to

north and south-east as the slope reaches the same level.

The beds on the top terrace originally consisted, as can be seen from the architect's plan, of borders running along the outer edge of the terrace and against the house, with two hexagonal island beds to south-west and south-east. The path ran between the outer and inner borders but surrounded the island beds completely, due to the narrowness of the terrace interrupting both outer and inner borders at these points. There is a door in the centre of the south-west wall of the house, and instead of an island bed in this position the path widens out, giving a small grass area to be crossed to reach the steps down to the lower terrace and the pond.

The shape of the hexagonal bed to the south-west has softened with time to make it almost circular, and the south-eastern bed has disappeared, but otherwise this layout remains. The parapet of the retaining wall of the terrace is about 35 cm high and has a wide, flat slate coping. The steps down to the lower terrace are also slate, with the same coping on the low walls flanking them.

The lower terrace is wider, lawned, with no beds or borders, and stepping stones crossing the grass from the steps up to the upper terrace to those down to the pond. There is no parapet, the shaped (but not dressed) stones of the top course of the retaining wall being flush with the grass. To the north, the lawn meets the edge of the drive, but to the south-east the slope is a little steeper, and the end of the terrace is cut back into it for a short distance, terminating with a dry-stone wall retaining the higher ground above.

About half of the garden, at the top of the plot, above the house to the south-east, forms the wild area. There were already several large trees here when the garden was laid out and there are now a great many more self-sown trees, so the character of the wild area is wooded. Several very small watercourses, including one rising from a spring, cross the woodland, making the ground damp and spongy. Most of the water finds its way into the small stream which runs along the south-western edge of the garden.

As the house plot is cut back into the slope, the lower edge of the woodland area is retained by a dry-stone wall, which more or less follows the outline of the house and parking area. Access to the wild garden is by rustic stone steps up this wall in two or three places.

The stream is natural, entering the garden at the south corner and leaving it at the west. It has, however, been roughly culverted with stone, the culvert being quite deep in places. A small circular pond lies directly south-west of the south-west house door and terrace steps, and the stream has been diverted to run through this. The pond is concrete-lined and has straight sides; it would be deep for its size (about 1.5 m diameter) but does not now remain full. It has been altered, and was originally shallower, and the stream less deeply culverted. Although there is some ornamental planting round it, and its position is clearly important to the design of the garden, it was also intended to be functional, as a dipping pool. On a more fanciful note, it has another purpose. According to the architect, the 'Spirit of the House' rises through the oak tree in the centre of the turning circle on the north-east of the house, shines through the crystal in the front door, passes out through the glass garden door, and sinks into the water of the pond.

The pergola and the roses have gone, but the path which ran beneath remains, leading north from the drive to a stile over the boundary wall. This path is cut slightly into the slope on the east, creating a bank on that side. The architect's plan shows that there were once six arches, and that there was a triangular rose bed west of the pergola.

The tennis court is to the south-east of the house, between it and the wild garden. It is above the retaining wall behind the house, but cut back further into the slope on the south-east and south-west. There is some dry-stone revetting in the banks thus created, and a grassy bank below on its lower side. It is not maintained as a tennis court, but now partly used as a vegetable garden.

The rest of the garden divides into two areas, north of the drive and south of it. They are both basically grassy areas dotted with shrubs and trees, each originally having a formal element - in the northern area, the triangular rose bed, and in the southern, a sundial with paved surround. Both of these features have now disappeared.

Garden of Wern Isaf Bach

The chalet has a very small garden of its own, which must once have been part of the wild garden. It is to the east of the cottage, which is itself north-east of the house, and is retained along its western edge by a low dry-stone wall. From this wall it slopes upwards to a point, and consists of a small triangular lawn with shrub borders each side, and a small paved area at the top with a tiny rockery in the point above. It is now quite separate from the main garden and quite different from it in character. It seems to have been kept maintained during the main garden's period of neglect.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mrs P Phillips

H.L. North, Plan of house and garden at Llanfairfechan, N. Wales

Secondary

Visitors' leaflet, 'The Life of H L North'