

CESTYLL

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 45 (ANG)
OS Map	114
Grid Ref	SH 345 933
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Anglesey
Community Council	Cylch-y-Garn/Mechell
Designations	Heritage coast
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading Unusual, small and intimate 1920s garden informally planted with tender plants, well suited to its rocky seaside site, which is of great natural beauty; good survival of original planting. Princess Victoria, a close friend of the garden's owner and principal designer, Violet Vivian, designed part of the garden.

Type of Site A small garden exploiting a particular site - the sheltered valley of a small stream, leading down to the sea - with interesting plantings and an intimate atmosphere.

Main Phases of Construction 1920s

SITE DESCRIPTION

Cestyll is an unusual garden, situated in a small valley running north to the sea, on the north coast of Anglesey, to the west of Wylfa Head. Originally Cestyll formed part of the Carreglwyd estate, but in 1918 the estate was broken up and Cestyll was bought by the Hon. William Walter Vivian as a present for his favourite niece, Violet. The Hon. Violet Vivian was a daughter of Lord Vivian of Bodmin and one of Queen Alexandra's maids of honour; when not waiting on the Queen she lived with her uncle at Glyn Bangor, and continued to do so at first, using Cestyll only for holidays, although she later made it her permanent home.

Nothing now remains of the house, but it was sited quite close to the edge of the cliff, with a view out to sea. It was demolished in 1991 as it had become unsafe. Since purchase of the property by the then Central Electricity Generating Board in 1983, as part of the Wylfa Power Station grounds, it had been uninhabited and unmaintained.

The gardener's cottage and garage form a continuous range along most of the south-east side of the kitchen garden. The garage, with its inspection pit, is to the south and appears relatively modern, but as the top of an arch is bricked up over the doors on the south end it is probably

converted from a building (stable/coach house?) shown on the 1900 25 in. Ordnance Survey map. The cottage is not shown on this map, but appears on the 1924 version, so it was probably built and the garage converted by Violet Vivian after she acquired the house in 1918.

Both are stone-built, the cottage having brick window surrounds; the roof of the whole range is slate and appears to have been fairly recently renewed. The cottage has a brick chimney, and there is a lean-to shed on the northern end.

The 1924 Ordnance Survey map shows three small sheds against the kitchen garden wall in the west corner, near the house; one of these also appears on the 1900 map. The remains of this, and all of the next, which is still standing, survive, with an entrance to the garden between them; the third has been cleared away and there is a large breach in the garden wall. A later, stone-built, shed is outside the garden at the north corner.

There are three further buildings indicated on the large-scale map of 1924, one of them circular, in the area north of the kitchen garden. Unfortunately this area is now so completely overgrown that it is impenetrable, and no buildings can be seen, but the concrete base of the largest of the buildings, on the east side, is visible. This may have been the boat house; although there is no slipway on the beach, there is known to have been a boat house at one time.

The garden, in a small valley to the west of the house site and divided from it by a field, was laid out from 1922 onwards, to take advantage of the particular site, both in terms of its geography - a small, rocky valley with a fast-flowing stream, leading down to a sea cove - and of the sheltered conditions, which allowed half-hardy and tender species to be grown. The result is an informal plantsman's garden which has many small, separate but linked areas, in many cases defined by the bends and loops of the stream, which give it a very intimate atmosphere.

Despite her commitments elsewhere, Violet Vivian began work on the garden early on, beginning to develop the valley of the Cafnan from 1922 onwards. An area corresponding roughly to the central third of the final garden is shown on the 1924 25 in. Ordnance Survey map as being enclosed and planted with shrubs, and there is a new footbridge across the stream.

Violet (with her twin sister Dorothy, also a maid of honour) was a great favourite with the Queen, and during her time at Court became friendly with several members of the royal family. Later they came to visit her at Cestyll, and Princess Victoria, a particular friend and one who was also, clearly, interested in gardening, was responsible for designing one small area of the valley garden. Violet herself designed the rest.

The first plantings were made without the benefit of any shelter but that offered by the natural shape of the ground, but later a shelter belt of conifers was added. This is mainly on the east side of the garden, the direction from which the most damaging strong, cold winds come. It continues along the south side to include a small compound in which there is a well and pump house. The shelter belt consists mostly of pines, many of which are modern replacements. A few large trees along the west boundary help to break the warmer wind from this direction.

The garden contains a very wide range of plants, concentrating on shrubs and waterside plants. There are also many ornamental trees, mostly smaller varieties which can flourish within the sheltered valley. There are many azaleas and rhododendrons, but these are by no means the main interest of the garden, which is notable for its variety.

A large, sloping rock outcrop on the western side of the garden was covered with soil carried there by hand, and carpeted with bedding plants - around 3,000 of them - every year. This continued until after the Second World War. In the summer, this carpet of vivid colour must have added a very different dimension to the otherwise rather green, leafy and watery world of the valley garden.

Violet Vivian was a well known local character and lived to the age of 83, dying in 1962. She is remembered for driving about the lanes in a succession of orange and black cars. After her death, her ashes were scattered in the garden, as those of her uncle had been, and there is a memorial tablet to them both.

The house and garden went, in 1962, to Violet's sister Dorothy's daughter, Lady Astor. In 1983 it was sold to the then CEGB on condition that the valley garden should be maintained and cared for, as a memorial to the two Vivians responsible for its creation. Violet had, in her lifetime, begun to open the garden to the public twice a year, and this practice, which had lapsed after her death, was reinstated in 1985.

The garden today probably remains much as it was in Violet's lifetime. The valley is narrow, steep and rocky, with outcrops in several places, and the soil is thin and sandy, bedrock being very near the surface where it is not outcropping. Despite the garden's small size, there is plenty of variety in its geography, including an extremely steep, sun-baked bank, shady nooks under overhanging rocks, damp areas beside the stream, and larger areas of more gently sloping ground.

The whole valley is crammed with growing things, from sizeable trees through a wide variety of shrubs to lush waterside perennials, and many narrow paths wind their way among shrubs, across tiny lawns and along the stream. There are several different areas, almost all linked by the stream, and none defined by any hard structure apart from the naturally outcropping rocks. The stream is crossed and re-crossed; there are different glimpses of the seaward view here and there; at every turn some interesting plant is in the foreground.

Being enclosed within a valley, the garden is essentially self-contained, but the view down towards the sea is an important aspect of its design, and the old mill in the foreground of this view, although outside the garden, adds a romantic touch. The romance is intensified by the hidden nature of the garden, and the fact that it lies at some distance from the house site and kitchen garden, across a bare field. There is no physical link with the house site, and a stile over the wall of the garden area around the house is the only remaining hint of a path across to the garden.

The highest part of the garden is at the southern end, and here there is a gravelled space where

one could sit to appreciate the view. To either side of this is an area of flat outcropping rock; that to the east has been treated as a rockery and planted with small shrubs, that to the west left bare. The stream runs in a deep cutting to the west of this.

In front of the gravelled area, which has its back to the boundary hedge, is a small lawn, the top part of which is paved with widely-spaced stone slabs and planted with specimen trees. From here, stone steps lead down through a small decorative iron gate towards the stream, which swings across to the east of the garden below the outcrop. Below the gate is a natural rockery, this time on steep rock faces cut by the stream and planted with larger shrubs. The steps lead down through this to a small, shady lawn beside the stream, with two larger trees. Opposite, on the other side of the stream, is a small, sheer cliff.

A detour to the west, via a modern wooden bridge across the stream, leads to another shady lawn in the small area designed by Princess Victoria. A sole gatepost in the western boundary hints at an entrance having been here at one time. The southern boundary is an old wire fence, with an iron grille across the stream to catch debris. Princess Victoria's garden is probably now rather more shady than it was when laid out, which has resulted in the loss of some plants, giving a rather bare appearance at present.

Following the stream across to the east, the path disappears into a tunnel created by the rock cliff on one side and very large shrubs growing on the stream edge on the other. On the far side of the stream, the rockery area with large shrubs north of the lawn continues to the east. At the end of the tunnel is another small lawn, in a loop of the stream where it swings right round back to the west. The stream is edged with shrubs, which thus surround the lawn, and in Violet Vivian's day picnics would be held or a trio or quartet of musicians would occasionally play on this lawn.

On the east side of the river, at the bend, is a steep bank, now rather bare and probably recently cleared, crossing which is a terracing wall about 1 m high, overgrown with ivy. A wooden bridge crosses the stream to the north, and immediately beyond is another, as the stream now curves sharply back to the east again. Between the two bridges is a flattish outcrop with plants and small shrubs growing in its crevices and around the edges. From here there is an open view to the sea. Beyond the second bridge is another flat outcrop, partly overflowed by the stream.

Just below the further bridge, on the east, is a small waterfall, and immediately past this the stream turns northwards and flows more or less straight, at the foot of a high, steep bank on the east, to the sea. On the west side of the stream is the largest open area in the garden, sloping fairly gently down from the west, and consisting mostly of lawn.

At the top, south-west, side of this area is the large outcropping slab which used at one time to be covered with bedding plants every summer. There is one small, curved terrace near the edge of this, retained by a tiny bit of dry-stone walling, which suggests that there may have been other similar terraces used to retain the soil for the bedding plants. To the east and north of the outcrop is an area of lawn, and beyond, to the north, is the watermill, Felin Cafnan. A culvert associated with the mill, dry at present, runs down the slope from the west across this lawn, to

join the stream. This culvert has been treated as part of the garden and its edges planted, and there are also beds in the lawn containing large, architectural plants. There are minor rocky outcrops and smaller beds with shrubs. Beside the stream, along the east edge of the lawn, are many wet-loving plants. The mill leat, also dry, which runs parallel with the culvert, to the north, forms the boundary of the garden here.

The east bank of the stream is very steep and sun-baked, resulting in the loss of several plants during the exceptionally hot, dry summer of 1995. Some small areas have now been replanted. Other areas carry a more or less wild vegetation, the removal of which poses a problem because of the angle of slope. The bank is dominated by a large pine tree, visible from almost every part of the garden, and there are several very narrow paths traversing the slope; these are, of necessity, revetted and some have stone slabs on edge on the upper side, suggesting an alternative use as seats.

In the north-east corner of the garden is a small, rough lawn with a few trees, from which there is a view out over an old dry-stone wall down to the beach. A steep path with steps ascends to this and continues up to the south-east, then runs along inside the eastern boundary of the garden. There is a way out to the shelter belt, or one can continue along the eastern edge of the garden, with good views down into it, descending a little westwards by steep paths or steps. On the face of an outcrop above the stream, opposite the small lawn used for picnics and music, is a plaque to the memory of Violet Vivian and William Walter Vivian. This is a plain stone tablet fixed to the face of a rock outcrop, with bronze lettering. The Vivians' ashes were scattered in the garden nearby. There are also three small dog graves in this area.

There was at one time clearly a small garden area surrounding the house, lying mostly in a rough semi-circle to west and north (open to the view, which is spectacular), but including a high-walled triangular area at the back of the house, on the east. Of the semi-circular area, nothing remains except the surrounding iron fence and hedge, with a stile over it on the valley garden side; there is no sign of a path crossing from this towards the garden, but it might have been ploughed up. The interior contains little but coarse grass, suggesting perhaps that it was mostly lawn.

The triangular area has the south-west wall of the kitchen garden for its north-east boundary, and another wall of similar height runs off the south corner of the kitchen garden, forming the south wall. This turned slightly northwards part way along, and met the back of the house, but this part of the wall has been destroyed, probably during demolition of the house. The area enclosed within these walls was rather narrow and must have been shaded by its walls, but would have been very sheltered. The surviving planting is ornamental.

There is an area north of the kitchen garden, occupying most of the remaining level space between its wall and the edge of the cliff, which must at one time have been part of the garden. The 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of 1900 shows nothing north of the kitchen garden except a small building at the east end of the north-east wall, but the 1924 map shows this building gone and three others (two on the east and a circular one to the north) replacing it, and the area partly enclosed. This dating strongly suggests that the changes were made by Violet Vivian.

The area is at present completely overgrown and impenetrable, and it is now fully enclosed by stone walls on all sides. The entrance, on the east side, has an iron field gate hung between cylindrical stone-built posts, and north of this the concrete base of the largest of the three buildings can be seen, but nothing is visible within except trees and undergrowth.

The kitchen garden is shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1900, and is probably contemporary with the house (which existed by the early nineteenth century at least). It is about 50m by 35m, surrounded by a wall. The garden lies to the north of the house site, and is rectangular, with a mortared stone wall up to 2 m high. This is roughly rendered on the inside. The ground level within the garden is lower than outside. There are entrances with wooden doors, painted yellow, still in place in the west corner and near the east corner, just beyond the gardener's cottage. There is also a door leading, up a flight of steps, directly into the garage. The wall seems to be generally in good condition, but there is a large deliberate breach on the south-west side, near the house site. It may have been created during demolition of the house, and it is probable that it enlarged a pre-existing entrance.

The interior of the garden is now completely overgrown and few details of the layout are discernible. There is, however, a line of fruit trees running south-west to north-east, and where the bases of these are fairly clear of undergrowth, at the south-west end, their positioning suggests that a path once ran between a double row of them. There does not appear to be any fruit against the walls. The 1900 Ordnance Survey map has a line across the garden from north-west to south-east which seems to suggest an internal division, but this had apparently disappeared by 1924. Some ornamental planting survives close to the south-west wall, including lilac and rose bushes.

Sources

Primary

Information from gardener

2-in manuscript map for Ordnance Survey 1-in. first edition

Secondary

Two Nuclear Electric visitors' leaflets