

MAESFRON

Ref No	PGW (Po) 53 (POW)
OS Map	126
Grid Ref	SJ 281114
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Montgomeryshire
Community Council	Trewern
Designations	Listed Building: House Grade II, entrance and railings Grade II, gazebo Grade II, grotto Grade II.
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	Good example of a compact and largely intact early nineteenth-century gentleman's residence with unusual gazebo and grotto in the garden, in a fine south facing situation.
Type of Site	Medium sized Georgian house and small formal garden.
Main Phases of Construction	c. 1800, c. 1830

SITE DESCRIPTION

Maesfron is sited part way down a steep south facing slope, perched above the A 458 road. The house is reached by a drive, long for the modest size of the site, which enters the garden off the north side of the road about 200m to the west, climbing diagonally towards the house. The house faces west and south. The house is an irregular two-storeyed Georgian house, rendered with a hipped slate roof. It comprises a square western block which has three bays on the west front, the central bay being recessed and containing a formal classical porch, with columns, on the ground floor, with a small balcony, decorated with mid-nineteenth-century ironwork, above. A set of French windows opens onto this balcony; all the other upstairs windows are sashes. A three-sided bay extension, which looks down over the garden, is attached to the south-east of this main block. Between the bay and the south-west end of the house there is an early nineteenth-century covered verandah with slim cast iron pillars and Greek key/fret work ironwork detail. This ironwork occurs again along a wall which separates a service passage from the east side of the house and in the garden.

Maesfron is believed to date from the early nineteenth century when it is believed that it was built for a local solicitor, Francis Allen, who had undertaken a mini Grand Tour. He appears to have aimed at creating a small classical house and garden. The land, on which the house was built, extended to about seven acres, which included the immediate garden and field to the west. A further unsubstantiated amount of land lay up Gareg Bank, to the north of a lane which enclosed the north side of the garden. This land included a small area of woodland and a service/accommodation block. Allen was still in occupation of the site in 1843 when a title map recorded the fields around the house as 'upper Maes Fron', to the west and 'upper crow field', to the east, which he had acquired in exchange from Sir J. R. Kynaston of Trewern Hall. In the latter part of the nineteenth century the property is believed to have been bought by the seafaring Owen family, to whom the present owners are related. The grotto bears the initials of the Owen women who were left at home when the men were at sea. The Owens are believed to have kept the house until about 1950, largely planting the garden and creating the tennis court. It was then bought by the Morris family, who were followed by the Bergens. The Bergens left the house in about 1990 and it was empty until the present owners took over. The Bergens sold the areas to the west and east of the garden to members of their family.

On the north of the house, separated from it by a narrow, partly covered, cobbled passage, there is a range of connected stone buildings which are built into the hillside. They date to c. 1800-1820. At the west end of the passage a pair of 2.5m high, narrow dressed stone gate piers stand about 2m apart, on either side of a high timber gate. Inside the gates, immediately on the north, there is a small faced rubble carriage house with a steeply sloping slate roof. The carriage arch survives but the building was evidently converted for use as a garage, probably by 1930. The wooden garage door survives, but the interior of the building has been converted into a billiard room. The carriage house connects on the east to a large detached two-storey kitchen. Between the two buildings there is a small, but high, coal store which has a trap door on a level with the second-storey of the kitchen. Coal was tipped into the store, through this trap door, from the rear north lane.

The kitchen is a large, square, faced rubble building with a hipped slate roof. On the ground floor an old range survives on the north side of the kitchen off which, on the east, a dairy and apple store open. These two rooms are underground, as externally the cobbled passage becomes the service drive which ascends to gates which open on to the north lane in the north-east. A high earth bank runs along the north of this drive to the east of the kitchen. Inside the kitchen a ladder leads up to the second storey on the west. Above is a second large room, possibly old staff accommodation. A small range lies on the north of the room. Both the kitchen and the upstairs room are lit by large sash windows on the south. Above the service drive on the earth bank, and attached to the east side of the kitchen, there is a red brick bothy containing an old seed room and potting shed. A privy appears to be situated at the rear of this building, abutting a high stone wall which creates the north wall of the kitchen and carriage house and which continues to the west and east as a boundary wall.

The garden at Maesfron is bordered on the west and east by two small fields or paddocks, each of less than 1 acre in extent. The fields are enclosed on the west, north-west and east and north-east respectively by the line of the northern lane. The western field is believed to

have been part of the original site, bought with other land by the builder of Maesfron in the early nineteenth century. According to a tithe map of 1843 the western field was a later acquisition obtained in exchange, probably for some other land, by Francis Allen from Sir J. R. Kynaston. At that time the east field was known as 'crow meadow' and the west as 'upper Maes Fron'. By 1881 the Ordnance Survey 25 in. map recorded the east field as 'Pheasant Cottage' and a cottage had been built against the centre of the northern boundary. By 1902 the Ordnance Survey recorded that the cottage had been demolished but that some sort of walled pen, possibly a pigsty, had been erected in the north-east of the field on the boundary of the shelter belt. A public footpath runs through the east field down the east side of the garden wall which, from map evidence, has been in use since at least 1843. The appearance of the western field seems to have remained the same from 1843 to 1881 with a line of trees having been planted along the roadside by 1881. The main drive ran through the area from the south-west. By 1902 the Ordnance Survey map recorded the creation of the small southern orchard to the west of the drive. The tennis court is believed to have been created by the Owen family before the Second World War, who are also believed to be responsible for planting the orchard. Both the west and east fields remained attached to the house until about 1990 when they were sold. In the western area the boundary of the garden is created by the east side of the orchard and tennis court and by a new hedge which runs diagonally north-east from the north-east corner of the tennis court to the northern boundary.

The garden at Maesfron lies to the west, south and east of the house on a south facing slope. It covers about 3 acres. Three high stone walls create a formal enclosure to the west, east and south. The drive approaches the house from a formal gateway in the south-west. The drive climbs north before turning east to run along a narrow terrace for about 150m to enter a narrow oval turning circle on the west front of the house. In the south-west the drive passes between two equal lengths of clipped beech hedge which hide, on the west, the orchard and tennis court and, on the east, a long rectangular piece of ground which is now used as an informal cricket pitch and golf course. An early twentieth-century five bar iron gate connects this field to the drive on the west. Above the eastern part of the drive there is a sloping open area of tree and shrub planted lawn and below it the beech hedge continues along the north of the rectangular field to the turning circle. In the centre of the turning circle there is a rock arrangement planted up with new dwarf conifers and heathers. On the north side of the circle, on a steep bank between the open lawn and the carriage house, there is a rock face, partly planted up with shrubs and drought resistant plants. On the west, this feature is enclosed by a stone wall which runs down the slope to the turning circle. The wall stands about 1.2m high and is capped. The line of this wall continues on the opposite side of the turning circle and descends down the east side of the rectangular field to the road/south boundary. The north end of this wall is set with the same early nineteenth-century fretted ironwork which occurs on the house, but here the ironwork is obscured beneath an extension of the beech hedge. A simple kissing gate leads into the rectangular field at this point. In the north-east corner of the tree planted lawn, besides the wall, there is a small corrugated iron and timber kennel block enclosed with high nineteenth-century kennel fencing.

A wide gravelled path runs along the south side of the house, beneath the verandah. At the western end of this path a set of nineteen fine dressed stone steps leads down along the east side of the field/garden wall. At the southern end of the wall a further set of ten steps descends between high stone walls to a narrow timber door set in a southern boundary wall.

Two narrow pinnacles up to 3m high ornament the doorway. At the top of the steps a gate also opens to the west, connecting back into the rectangular field. From the centre point of the verandah a set of stone steps leads down two steep terraces, each of which are about 2m deep. Fifteen steps connect with the verandah and path and twelve with a third terrace which slopes down onto a more level piece of ground inside the southern wall. The terraces are grassed apart from an area on the west of the first and second terrace where a shrubbery has been developed. A few trees and shrubs grow on the sloping ground beneath the terraces. A path runs along between the first and second terrace which is partly edged in quartz. The path runs west, back to the turning circle and east where it progresses around a curving south-eastern facing slope in the east of the garden. This slope is partly hidden underneath laurel, rhododendron and holly and, in the south-east, the path runs along a narrow ledge. Above the path the bank is retained by a substantial rock wall.

About 10m to the east of the central steps a set of narrow stone steps leads up to the north-east to an area above the south-east facing slope. About 4m further east along the path there is a fine early nineteenth-century shell and quartz grotto set into the bank. The small grotto is faced with tufa rockwork, a narrow ogee stone doorway leading into a domed chamber which is decorated with shells and quartz. The east path concludes at the east boundary wall where it branches to the north and south. To the south it links back around to the west to the sloping lawn. Beneath the grotto the slope is studded with rocks which may have been part of a rock garden. A small square tiled seating area is set besides the slope to the north of a grassed over stone lined path which runs inside of the south boundary wall. To the east of this tiled area there is a mature magnolia. Above the east path a north path links back around to a small level lawn on top of the slope and the grotto. On the north the lawn is enclosed by the south wall and hedge of the walled kitchen garden. A small old pear tree grows at the eastern end of the lawn and in the south-west there is a round stone castellated gazebo. The gazebo is entered from the west at the end of a wide path which is a continuation of the path along the south front of the house. Single stone steps are set into this path to cope with the change in ground level which rises slightly to the east. A set of dressed stone steps leads up into the gazebo which is virtually derelict. Inside the building is painted blue and lit by three perpendicular windows face south and south-east but no views can be taken on account of the glass and the trees and shrubs which have grown up above the grotto. The stone steps to the west of the grotto lead up to the gazebo on the south-western side.

It is believed that the gardens are contemporary with the house and laid out between 1800 and 1830. The major change to the gardens has been the inclusion of part of the western field. It would seem that this had occurred by 1881. All of the features in the garden are believed to date from the early nineteenth century with the exception of the planting which, in maturity, appears to date from about 1920 on and the kennel block which first appears on the 1881 Ordnance Survey map. The planting could be contemporary with the creation of the tennis court in the west field and the planting of the beech hedge along the drive. The wall to the west of the house and garden appears to have been partially demolished, widening the aspect of the west garden. On the tithe map of 1843, and the Ordnance Survey maps of 1881 and 1902, the wall connects to the drive on each side suggesting that there was a second pair of gates. It is unknown when this work was carried out. In form the drive and the turning circle have remained the same since at least 1843. Planting within the garden was undoubtedly affected by the decline and dereliction of the property from the late 1980s. Recent clearance

of bramble and laurel has revealed different species of snowdrops and cyclamen.

There appear to have been two areas of kitchen garden at Maesfron. The first lies immediately to the east of the house on a raised level terrace between the rear service drive and the south garden. The terrace is rectangular in shape and covers an area of about 15m x 8m. In the south-east corner is the gazebo. The terrace area is laid out with loose gravel paths around a pair of central long rectangular beds which are partly edged in stone. These beds are planted up as flower and herb borders. To the north the area is enclosed by a 3m high red brick stone capped wall, dropping a further 2m on the service drive side. Missing vents give it a castellated appearance. The wall connects to the house on the east and runs the length of the area to the west to intersect a wall running from the north. This brick north/south wall, which stands to about 2m high, encloses the area for about 3m on the east. A large wisteria grows against this wall which appears to date from about 1920-1930. The wall contains a stove hole near the ground showing that it was once heated. Along the south face of the north wall in the east there is a lean-to greenhouse which connects to the base of a second lost greenhouse in the east. Both of the greenhouses measure about 4.5m x 2m. To the east of this iron stanchions survive in the wall, possibly indicating the position of a lean-to frame. Adjacent to this an ogee door connects back into the east of the house.

The single-aisled greenhouse has been repaired, the brick base replaced by concrete block. It is unclear if it was ever heated, no pipes remain inside. The brick base of the west greenhouse survives and within it there is a two-tone tiled floor. Whitewash survives on the south face of the north wall above the base. At the eastern end of the east greenhouse a set of steep slate and brick spiral steps lead down to the east end door. Immediately to the north of these steps there is a simple arch doorway which leads through the north wall out on to the service drive. Adjacent to this arch, on the north-east, a second arch, and door, leads through into the second area of kitchen garden. A narrow curved cobbled path links the two archways.

The second garden area is also rectangular but slightly larger. Stone capped walls up to 2m high lined with a brick skin run around the west and north sides of the area. On the east the eastern stone garden wall creates the boundary but the width of the kitchen garden is indicated by two small pyramidal capped piers to the north and south. On the south it appears that there was a stone wall but the central portion has been removed to be replaced by a holly hedge. In the south-west corner of the garden there is a small building, a stone bothy, which was converted into a concrete slab covered air raid shelter in the Second World War. Small stones set into the concrete record 'H. D. O. J. D. O. 1944'. The air raid shelter is reached by a short flight of steps which descend into it. The main area of the garden is a level terrace which appears to have been built up at same stage as, at its central point, the eastern wall is almost at ground level. On the south face of the north and north-east walls some cordoned fruit trees survive. The southern area of the garden is gravelled and surrounded by new brick paths. A narrow grass path on line with the west door runs along the north side of this and separates it from a vegetable border which has been partly edged with stone. The internal layout of the garden appears to be fairly recent.

It is unclear if both of these areas were originally designed to function as productive gardens. Their shapes are certainly recorded on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of about

1881 but their appearance on the earlier tithe map is unclear. It is possible, given the proximity of the gazebo and south path, and the fact that no south wall is recorded in the west kitchen garden, that this area also had an ornamental role. Two greenhouses were recorded in their present positions in 1881. The appearance of the central area of the garden prior to about 1960 is, however, unknown. The eastern garden appears to have been used for fruit and vegetables, no glasshouses or frames were recorded there on either the 1881 or 1902 Ordnance Survey maps. The air-raid shelter, presumably converted by the Owen family, does appear to have once been used either as a bothy or boiler house, some sort of heating evidently being supplied to its west brick wall on the west face of which the wisteria now grows. In appearance it does appear that the ground level inside the east garden has been raised, possibly when the south wall was removed, but this is uncertain. The internal appearance of this area prior to about 1960 is unknown. The decaying fruit trees appear to date from about 1920.

Sources

Primary 1843 tithe map. National Library of Wales.

Secondary Haslam, R., The Buildings of Powys (1979), p. 205