

## WENVOE CASTLE

**Ref number** PGW (Gm) 33 (GLA)

**OS Map** 171

**Grid ref** ST 121 713

**Former county** South Glamorgan

**Unitary authority** The Vale of Glamorgan

**Community council** Wenvoe

**Designations** None

**Site evaluation** Grade II

**Primary reasons for grading** The survival of the bones of a landscape park and gardens of the mid to late eighteenth century. The mid eighteenth-century rococo landscaping in Bears Wood, where the remains of a grotto and serpentine canal survive, is of particular interest. Earlier remains include the house platform and probably the terrace behind it known as the 'Green'. The mid eighteenth-century shrubbery, nursery, walled gardens and long walk may also be adaptations of earlier garden features.

**Type of site** Landscape park; formal gardens; shrubbery; rock garden; walled kitchen garden

**Main phases of construction** 1760s-1791

### Site description

The present Wenvoe Castle, home to the Wenvoe Castle Golf Club, is all that remains of a vast mansion designed by Robert Adam for Peter Birt and built, with modifications to Adam's plan, in 1776-77. The remaining portion consists of a plain three-storey pavilion wing of four bays, faced with grey Quarella stone, flanked by two-storey, four-bay wings of similar but slightly darker stone. Windows are sashed, and the roofs are gently pitched, with the corner remains of castellation on the central block. The house stands on the east end of a long east-west platform built out over a south-facing slope. From the south front there are panoramic views out over the former park, now a golf course. To the north is the stable court.

There has been a house on the site of Wenvoe Castle from at least the sixteenth century onwards. Edmund Thomas, who was building up his holdings of land in Glamorgan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, acquired the castle and manor of Wenvoe from the Earl of Pembroke at this time and built a large, elongated house of 24 hearths where the later Wenvoe Castle stood. This house is shown on an estate map of 1762-63, standing on a long platform, with outbuildings and a levelled 'Green' to the north. The subsequent house appears to have been built

on the same platform and the 'Green' is now the golf club car park. The Thomas family played a prominent role in local affairs, acquired a baronetcy in 1694 and continued to own Wenvoe Castle until 1774, when debt forced Sir Edmund Thomas, fourth baronet, to sell the estate. His father, Sir Edmund, third baronet, had greatly overstretched his resources by his electioneering and extensive landscaping.

Peter Birt, who bought Wenvoe Castle in 1774, was a Yorkshire businessman who had amassed huge wealth from tolls on the Aire and Calder Navigation. He demolished the old house and built a new one based on designs for it by Robert Adam dated 1776. The executant architect appears to have been Birt's friend Thomas Roberts who was working at the time in Cardiff. The house was enormous, built in Roman fortress style with a castellated roofline and a very long three-storey south front. The central block had taller protruding central sections and semi-hexagonal corner towers. Flanking this were long low wings terminating in three-storey pavilions. It is the east pavilion that survives, flanked by later additions. The 1878 Ordnance Survey map shows a conservatory along the south front of the east pavilion but this does not appear on photographs of 1909, which show glasshouses to the east, now gone.

The house remained in the hands of the Birt and then (by marriage) Jenner families until the twentieth century, but a serious fire in 1910 destroyed one wing, including the library. The house limped on, part being taken over by the golf club in the 1930s. The remainder was subsequently demolished.

To the north of the house is a fine three-sided stable court. Built of the same stone as the house, the main two-storey range is on the east, with a wide central arched entrance over which is a third storey and clock-turret, topped by a weather vane. The west side is open and is bounded by a stone revetment wall. Twin flights of steps lead down to the courtyard and between them are three central arches, the side ones blocked. The central arch has four small side arches in its walls. The remaining sides of the court are two-storey, with windows in blind arcading. The surface of the courtyard is tarmacked. The stable block is attributed to Henry Holland, who was working at Cardiff Castle in the late 1770s, and is contemporary with Birt's house of 1776-77.

Wenvoe Castle park is a medium-sized landscape park of c. 324 acres lying on rolling ground between Wenvoe and Barry. The house lies towards the north end of the park and from it there are fine views southwards out over the core of the park, known as the Lawn (or Front Lawn). The highest part of the park is at the south end, where it is bounded by the A4226 road. The house is approached from the north, the drive running southwards through the park and then south-westwards through the grounds to a car park on the 'Green' platform to the west of the stable block. The drive originally swept round in front of the north side of the house, where it widened into a small forecourt. A branch leads southwards from the entrance to the gardens along the west side of the kitchen garden to the entrance to the stable court.

The park has always been divided into four main areas, and these are still identifiable. First, to the north of the house is Waun Lawn, a rectangular, gently rolling area of tree-fringed grassland planted with a few oaks, and with a small pond near the south-west corner. The tarmac main entrance drive crosses this area diagonally from the entrance in the north-east corner. On the west side of the entrance is a small single-storey lodge. It is simple in style, with a central projecting porch, rendered walls and a pitched slate roof. Although modernised it is largely nineteenth-century in appearance and appears on the 1878 Ordnance Survey map. At the south

end of Waun Lawn the drive is flanked by square stone piers flanked by tumbled walls. Immediately to the south-west is a small sparsely wooded area of oak and beech which appear to be planted in rows, with three pines in the corner.

Secondly, to the south and west of the house and garden is the Lawn or Front Lawn. This is the core of the park. The ground drops away to the west and south from the house, rising again to the south. This entire area is now occupied by the golf course and is of open mown grassland planted with scattered deciduous and coniferous trees. To the south-west of the house is a kidney-shaped pond with a small island, flanked by a row of recently planted conifers. Much of the planting in this area, such as the strip of young beech and pine trees between fairways at the south-east end, is recent and related to the golf course. However, there are a few old oaks and sweet chestnuts, many of which are dead or dying. The east boundary, along the A4050 road, is fringed by a belt of deciduous woodland.

The third area is Bears Wood. This is a large area of deciduous woodland lying on a north-facing slope to the south-west of the Lawn. A tongue of woodland projects northwards in the middle and two small streams run northwards into this tongue where they join and continue northwards along the park boundary. The wood consists mostly of oak and beech. Where the eastern stream runs along the east side of the tongue of woodland it is channelled, with its sides partly stone revetted and with a small brick dam. Between the two streams, in the tongue of woodland, is a circular mound *c.* 2.5 m high with a ruined building of roughly coursed stone in its centre. It has two gently arched wide openings opposite each other and a single chamber inside. This is the remains of the grotto shown on the 1762-63 estate map. To the west the stream leads into a wider boggy area with stone revetment walls, which is the remains of the serpentine canal shown on the same map.

The fourth area is the Upper Lawn, the southern end of the park, to the south of Bears Wood and the Lawn, bounded on the south by the A4050. This includes the highest ground of the park and is a large area of open grassland sloping to the north, part of which is used as a golf driving range, with a belt of mixed deciduous trees along the south boundary.

The park was largely the creation of Sir Edmund Thomas, third baronet, between 1733, when he inherited the estate, and his death in 1767. From various contemporary accounts he appears to have been a fanatical improver and landscaper, overstressing his finances to buy up parcels of land, fill in ditches, move roads, and generally to create his park. By 1762 (estate map) a park of 208 acres had been created, with all the main components that survive today in place. Waun Lawn at this time was confined to the area to the east of the present drive, the area to the west being fields, and there was no drive through it, access being from the public road which at that time skirted the shrubbery to the east of the house and then ran northwards along the route of the present track to Burdonshill. The Lawn at this time extended less far east than at present, with the public road skirting it. The pond was not in existence. Both Waun Lawn and the Lawn were dotted with trees. The Upper Lawn, like the Lawn, extended less far east, and the south-east corner was owned by one William Hurst. A narrow belt of trees was planted along its south boundary.

The most interesting part of this mid eighteenth-century park is Bears Wood. The map shows this laid out in rococo style, with intersecting rides leading to circular clearings, one of which, near the centre, was quite large. In the tongue at the north end a 'Grotto', serpentine 'Canal' and 'Green' are shown. Of all these features only the canal and grotto remain and these are degraded and ruinous. The style of layout of this wood

is transitional between earlier baroque formality and the high landscape style of the 1760s-70s, which suggests that it may have been done in the 1730s-50s rather than the 1760s. It is reminiscent of the layout of Wray Wood at Castle Howard. In August 1769 the Hon James Grimston stayed at Wenvoe Castle and recorded in his diary that the grounds were 'laid out in the modern taste', implying that the park as a whole was landscaped in the manner of Capability Brown. Bears Wood was more old-fashioned.

A second survey of 1798 shows the park extended to its present limits. The Sale Particulars of 1769 show that the park had been extended to 324 acres by the time of Sir Edmund's death, making it probable that much of this extension of area was achieved between 1762 and 1767. This necessitated the closing of the public road along the north edge of the shrubbery and the moving of the road along the east boundary further eastwards to its present line. Waun Lawn was thus doubled in size, although the present drive across it was still not made. It appears on the 1878 Ordnance Survey map. The public road from Burdonshill became the drive. The extension of the Lawn eastwards stranded a farmhouse - Moorcot - in the middle of it; this appears on the 1798 map, but was then removed. A belt of trees was planted along the east boundary and the last remaining corner of the Upper Lawn had been acquired. The layout of Bears Wood remained the same, and the pond had appeared in the Lawn.

The 1878 Ordnance Survey map shows little change. A track leading southwards from the east end of the house across the park has appeared. The golf course has been superimposed on the park with little earth-moving. However, modern planting connected with it, including many conifers, is mostly not in keeping with the historical character of the park.

The garden and grounds of Wenvoe Castle lie mainly to the east and west of the house. They occupy a roughly triangular area, with the apex at the north end, where the drive enters the grounds. The walled kitchen garden occupies the centre of the area, with the former shrubbery to the east, the house terrace to the south and south-west and the 'Green' and rock garden to the west. The ground rises gently from the north end to a roughly level plateau, dropping away from the grounds on the south and west.

The drive runs south-westwards up a slight slope from the edge of Waun Lawn through a sparsely wooded area of oak and beech trees planted in rows to a former entrance consisting of one of a pair of looped iron gates (west side surviving) between fluted cylindrical iron piers. A branch of the drive leads from here southwards to the stable court entrance, with the west wall of the kitchen garden, to its east, screened by a laurel hedge. The drive continues, flanked by three pairs of Irish yews, through a small grassed area planted with pines, an Atlantic blue cedar (*Cedrus atlantica glauca*) and conifer bushes to a square level platform now tarmacked and used as a car park. The ground is scarped below it on the north and west sides. On the east side steps lead to the stable court and on the south is a belt of seedling deciduous trees on the site of Wenvoe Castle. Below, on the west side is a narrow belt of beech trees.

The remaining part of the house stands at the east end of a long east-west terrace built out over the south-facing slope, with a grass scarp below it. Immediately in front of the house the terrace is part concrete-paved, with a low modern concrete wall in front. The remainder is grassed. Towards the west end it is backed by a steep bank in which there are some stonework remains of the former house. In front of the present house, and a little to the west, it is bounded by iron fencing. An iron pedestrian gate opposite the house leads to a sloping path to the golf course.

Towards the west end of the garden the ground slopes westwards. In the centre of the slope overgrown and neglected stone-edged paths, with stone steps, lead from the west, north and east to a sunken area surrounded by large blocks of rockwork. This overgrown area is the remains of a substantial rock garden. At its foot is an oval stone and cement-lined pool. Below, the garden is bounded by overgrown yew hedging on the north, south and west.

To the east of the house terrace are the remains of a yew hedge flanking a rough grass area. To the north is the kitchen garden. Near the south side of the kitchen garden is a circular brick-lined pool, with steps down into it on the east side and traces of a concrete path around it. This is the remains of a fountain, shown on the 1878 Ordnance Survey map but not on the 1798 estate map. Along the south side of this area are a number of large mature trees, including two cedars, a horse chestnut, pines and other conifers. At the east end of the area, to the south of the east wall of the kitchen garden, a neglected iron archway leads into the former shrubbery, now a woodland of seedling trees. The former shrubbery is now a triangular area of seedling deciduous trees to the east of the kitchen garden. There is no trace of former paths.

The gardens were laid out in three main phases. First, there are the remains of the gardens which went with the original, sixteenth to seventeenth-century house on the site, made by Edmund Thomas. These include the house platform and the square platform behind it, called the 'Green' on the 1762 map. How much of the layout to the east of the house that is shown on the 1762 map belongs to this early phase and how much to the work of Sir Edmund Thomas, third baronet, in the mid eighteenth century is not clear. However, the walled enclosures and gardens shown on the site of the present kitchen garden belong stylistically to the earlier phase. This is made more probable by the formal layout of the central compartment, or 'Garden' (as opposed to the 'Kitchen Garden' to the south), which has perimeter and crossing paths and a central feature. To the north are smaller compartments - a 'Drying yard' and 'Rick yard' - which may also have been survivors from the earlier period. Other elements of the gardens shown on the 1762 map are the 'Nursery' at the north end, the 'Shrubbery' occupying the east end and a 'Long Walk' along the south side of the kitchen garden and shrubbery. Again, it is not certain that these are the work of Sir Edmund Thomas, third baronet; they may have been in existence before he inherited in 1733. The formality of the Long Walk would argue for its being already in place. It is probable, therefore, that the whole area of the gardens was in existence in 1733, and possibly all dates back to the time of the first Edmund Thomas.

The second phase is the alterations to the gardens by Sir Edmund Thomas, third baronet, between 1733 and 1767. His main contributions were the closing of the public road along the northern boundary between 1762 and 1767 and the creation of a fashionable shrubbery at the east end before 1762. This area may have been pre-existing woodland or orchard. The layout shown on both the 1762 and 1798 maps shows that a circuit of paths which led to a clearing in the centre was created in a densely planted area. This layout was rather in the same rococo style as that of Bears Wood. The walled gardens next to the house remain, with the exception of the drying ground, which was removed between 1762 and 1798. The Long Walk, with a row of trees on its south side, is also shown on both maps.

The third phase took place during the occupancy by the Birts and Jenners during the nineteenth century. The 1878 Ordnance Survey map shows that by this time the walled compartments had been replaced by one large walled kitchen garden on the same site, that the drive now swept up to the north front of the house, which it did not

in 1798 and that the fountain was in place. The Long Walk appears to survive, albeit with a tree planted on it, but the walks in the shrubbery are not shown. The paths, rockery and pool at the west end of the garden are also not shown, and were probably late Victorian or Edwardian in date. No change has been made to the layout by the golf club, but the gardens are disused and have been allowed to become overgrown.

The kitchen garden is situated to the east and north-east of the stable court. It is a square area, walled on all but the south side, which is fenced. The west wall is of rubble stone construction on the outside and brick inside as far as a door in the wall near the south end. From there to the corner it is wholly of stone, and a short stretch continues, at a lower height, along the south side. The east wall is of similar height but of stone only, with flat stone coping. Again, a short stretch returns at a lower height along the south side. Along the north side is a high brick wall as far as a gardener's cottage, The Bothy, which abuts the wall near the east end. To its east is a short stretch of stone wall. The interior of the garden is grassed except for the north-west corner, where a new house has been built within it.

There have been walled gardens on the site of the kitchen garden since at least 1762, when two are shown where the present one lies, that at the north end the 'Garden' and that to its south the 'Kitchen Garden'. These appear to occupy the site of the present garden almost exactly, which may mean that the stone walls originated in the eighteenth century or earlier. The garden is shown as a single unit on the 1878 Ordnance Survey map, which shows cross and perimeter paths and glasshouses at the north end. All these have gone, as has most of the south wall. The Bothy, a two-storey house, is not shown on this map.

## Sources

### Primary

Map of Wenvoe Castle and demesne lands, 1762-63, by William Morrice: Glamorgan Record Office, D/D We E/1 map III.

Map of 'Wenvoe Castle with its Lawns Gardens and Woods', 1798, by Thomas Morrice: Glamorgan Record Office, D/D We E/2.

### Secondary

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