

CADW/ICOMOS REGISTER OF LANDSCAPES, PARKS AND GARDENS
OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST IN WALES

REGISTER ENTRY

THE VAN

Ref number	PGW (Gm) 13 (CAE)
OS Map	171
Grid ref	ST 166 868
Former county	Mid Glamorgan
Unitary authority	Caerphilly
Community council	Van
Designations	Listed building: Remains of Van House and dovecote Grade II
Site evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	Remains of a Tudor walled and terraced garden attached to an important house of the period.
Type of site	Walled and terraced garden
Main phases of construction	<i>c.</i> 1583

Site description

The Van, or Y Fan, is a substantial Tudor mansion situated on a ridge to the east of Caerphilly. It lies on a north and north-west facing slope overlooking the town. The house has been partially restored from a derelict state in recent years; the north wing is now lived in but the main block remains unfinished.

The house is L-shaped, built of coursed local rubble stone with local stone and sandstone dressings. The main block, orientated north-south, is of two storeys and a gabled attic storey with steeply pitched roofs. Projecting from the north end is a three-storey porch. The ground and first floors have large mullioned and transomed windows, the second floor smaller mullioned ones. A subsidiary wing extends east from the south end of the main block. This is lower, of two storeys, rendered and with mullioned windows and an entrance door on the south side. To the west of the main block is a walled court closed on the west side by a ruined gatehouse, west range, and ruined bakehouse. Abutting the storeyed porch, and against the court wall, are the ground floor remains of a range that was three storeys high originally. The springings of an archway into the court are visible on its west side, and on its south side, facing the court, are two blocked archways lined with large dressed stone blocks. The

purpose of the ground floor of this range would seem to have been an arcade or portico, possibly with a doorway at its east end leading through into the garden. A photograph taken in about 1900 shows the block still standing but roofless, with the two south-facing arches blocked.

The Van was built mainly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and was at that time one of the largest houses of the period in the county. In 1529 Edward Lewis bought the property, on which a house already existed, described by John Leland soon afterwards as 'a fair place'. It was his son, Thomas Lewis (died 1594), who succeeded him soon after 1561, who built the present house, which incorporated parts of the earlier sixteenth-century house, walled court and gatehouse between 1583 and 1594. In 1583 Thomas Lewis obtained a lease of Caerphilly Castle, which allowed him to plunder it for stonework. Much dressed stone at The Van is from the castle. In the early seventeenth century Thomas's son Edward extended the east wing and added the west and north ranges on the north-west side of the court and the arcaded building next to the storeyed porch. By this time the Lewis family was very prosperous, and in 1616 Edward bought St Fagan's Castle and moved there. Thereafter The Van was only a subsidiary Lewis house, and had probably been largely dismantled by 1736 when the Lewis estates were inherited by the 4th Earl of Plymouth. The property remained part of the Plymouth estates until 1991.

The gatehouse is situated in the centre of the west wall of the entrance court. Its ramped approach has gone, and it is in ruinous condition. It is a two-storey building of coursed rubble with a battered base and dressed stone quoins. The arched entrance is partly blocked, the building having been converted into living accommodation at some stage. On the first floor is a fireplace with the initials T and L (Thomas Lewis) in each spandrel.

A circular dovecote built of coursed stone rubble stands to the north of the house. The original dovecote survived entire until it collapsed after the severe winter of 1947, and until recently stood only to half its full height, but it has been fully restored to its original appearance, using photographs of about 1910, with a domed stone roof and 1,000 nesting boxes inside. It has an arched doorway on the west side. This probably dates to the sixteenth century.

A rebuilt separate house lies to the north-west of the entrance court. Built of stone, this probably dates to the nineteenth century, before 1846, when it is shown on the Tithe Award map. Another house, also rebuilt, of similar date lies to the south-west of the dovecote, and a former barn (now a separate dwelling), also probably early nineteenth-century in date, lies to the north-east of the house. The original houses, still inhabited, are shown on a photograph of the 1890s.

There are three main components to the gardens and grounds. First there is the entrance court to the west of the main block of the house; secondly there is the walled and terraced garden to the east of the house; and thirdly there is a walled area on the slope below the house and court, to their west, which was formerly part of the ornamental grounds. Thomas Lewis is known to have made a deer park, described as 'newly enclosed' in about 1578 by Rice Merrick, but its whereabouts are not known.

The house is approached by a sunken lane from the south. The original entrance ran north from the lane along the west side of the entrance court to the gatehouse and beyond, around to the north side of the house. This is no longer in use, but the entrance has recently been closed by modern gates and piers. The lane, which is lined with stone walls, broken down in places, then leads north-east up the hill past the east wing of the house. On its south side there are two blocked entrances in the

revetment walling suggesting that the area to the south of the lane may at one time have been part of the grounds. A footpath runs from a pedestrian gate in the wall to the main door of the east wing. Between the lane and the house is a triangular area of lawn with a large Monkey Puzzle tree at the east end. The west end of this area is bounded by a steep turf scarp down to the former drive.

The entrance court was built by Thomas Lewis in the late sixteenth century, at the same time as the house was largely rebuilt. A large rectangular area is enclosed by a coursed rubble stone wall and by the gatehouse and an early seventeenth-century range and ruined bakehouse on the west side. To the south of the gatehouse the wall stands *c.* 4 m high, with a slightly battered base and three evenly spaced drainage holes. The south wall is lower, with a wide modern gap in the middle. A photograph of 1947 shows the top of an arch above a hedge in this position, suggesting that there was originally an arched entrance where the gap now is. The photograph also shows two trees in the forecourt. The north wall of the court stands to its full height of *c.* 2.5 m, and is topped by dressed stone coping. In the middle is a doorway with a rounded arch and dressed stone jambs. In the north-east corner is the ruined arcaded wing of the house.

The terraced garden is a rectangular area enclosed by the east wing of the house on the south side, by walls on the east and north sides, and by a wall and scarp on the west side. It lies on ground rising to the east and is divided into a narrow upper terrace and a broader lower one. The walls are of coursed rubble stone. The north wall is the most complete, standing for the most part to its full height of *c.* 2-3 m. It has a blocked entrance in the middle and near the lower end a former entrance, now a gap, with lighter coloured quoins of large squared blocks on the west side. The western end of the wall is terminated with similar quoin stones. The west wall is *c.* 2.3 m high on the outside, and only a little higher than ground level on the inside. It stops half way along the side with a slight inturn, and the edge of the garden continues southwards on the same alignment as an earth scarp, with one small section of stone revetment showing. The east wall stands up to *c.* 2 m. It is in a ruinous condition, with several holes and gaps in it. Towards its south end it lowers to *c.* 1.3 m. In the south-east corner it is only a few courses high. A short stretch of wall of similar height runs west from the corner to the east end of the house.

The raised terrace along the east side of the garden is *c.* 3.5 m wide and *c.* 1.3 m high. On its west edge, which is for the most part a steep bank, some stone revetment is visible, including that in the corner at the north end.

The garden is abandoned and the only vegetation is seedling sycamores, particularly along the edge of the raised terrace, and a large oak in the south-west corner.

The terraced garden is also thought on grounds of style and walling to be contemporary with the house rebuilding in the late sixteenth century. It appears to be unaltered since that date, except for its general decay. After 1616, when Edward Lewis removed to St Fagan's Castle, further work on the gardens is unlikely. The 1873/75 Ordnance Survey map indicates that some of the garden may have disappeared: it shows two walled compartments north of the house, one to the north-west, with outbuildings against its east wall, and one to the north-east. The north-west compartment has gone, and the dividing north-south wall between the two no longer remains. The definite north-west corner of the existing garden lies to the east of the dividing wall that has gone, indicating that this may have been one side of a doorway

and that to the west of it the wall extended, as shown on the map, enclosing a third, lower terrace.

To the north-west of the house and garden is a vaulted sunken well chamber. Narrow stone steps lead down a stone-lined path to a circular pool, with a side chamber to the left. The arch over the pool entrance and the side chamber are of brick.

The third main area of the grounds is a large, roughly square field to the west of the former entrance drive, on ground sloping to the west. This is surrounded by a partly ruinous dry-stone wall, stretches of which are now concrete-capped. At its western end is a belt of trees, including pines. The 1873/75 Ordnance Survey map shows this area as well wooded, with mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. The history of this area is problematical. The walling appears ancient, and may even relate to Thomas Lewis's deer park. The planting, however, was probably nineteenth-century.

Sources

Primary

Photographs of 1890s and c. 1900: Caerphilly Local History Society and Cardiff Central Library.

Secondary

Handbook and guide to Caerphilly and district (1947), p. 43.

Toulmin Smith, L., ed., *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1536-1539*, III (1906, 1964), p. 18.

Jones, H.C., *Old Caerphilly and district in photographs* (1979), nos 160-62.

Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Glamorgan*, IV (1981), pp. 191-203.

Newman, J., *The buildings of Wales. Glamorgan* (1995), pp. 178-79.