

RHIWLAS

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| Ref No | PGW (Gd) 25 (GWY) |
| OS Map | 125 |
| Grid Ref | SH 924 371 |
| Former County | Gwynedd |
| Unitary Authority | Gwynedd |
| Community Council | Llandderfel |
| Designations | None |
| Site Evaluation | Grade II |

Primary reasons for grading Well situated and well preserved landscape park initially laid out by William Emes, with some fine mature trees, providing the setting for varied ornamental gardens.

Type of Site Park, ornamental gardens, woodland walk, walled kitchen gardens..

Main Phases of Construction Late eighteenth and nineteenth century

SITE DESCRIPTION

Rhiwlas has belonged to one family, the Prices, for several centuries, and is still in their hands. The house has, however, been comprehensively rebuilt twice in the last two centuries, the first time on the grand scale, with main gateway and stables to match, and the second time more modestly, resulting in a house practical to live in and keep up.

The house is sited at the south-west corner of the relatively level north-eastern quadrant of the demesne, slightly off-centre to the whole. Most of the rest of this quadrant is taken up with gardens. The house is modern, replacing an enormous rambling nineteenth-century mansion which was demolished in the early 1950s. This was three-storeyed and castellated with turrets, built in 1809 on the same site as previous houses. The present house was designed by Clough Williams-Ellis and built in 1954.

Although much smaller than the house it replaces, and of such a recent date, the house fits perfectly with its surroundings and has obviously been designed to blend in with the older outbuildings. It is more or less square, two-storeyed, of grey stone with a low-pitched slate roof. The Georgian-style windows have small panes in white frames; most are sashes, but a high proportion are French windows.

All the existing outbuildings, together with some that have gone, are shown on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of 1901. Those near the house may be considerably older, pre-dating the large farm building and stable complexes elsewhere.

On two sides of the yard north of the house are stone-built, slate-roofed outbuilding ranges, with white-painted sash windows. The northern range is now a house, but may have been two cottages; the eastern has a cottage at one end and what is now the office at the other, with wide double garage doors in between - possibly a carriage house/stables before the main stable block was built. North of the yard, alongside a track leading off to the north-west, is another row of outbuildings, all stone-built. The first is a long barn/cart shed with three wide entrances, one arched and the others with flat lintels. There is an upper storey reached by a door at one end, but there are no steps so presumably a ladder was used. The slate roof appears to have been quite recently renewed. Next in this row is a small kennel yard, enclosed by a stone wall with iron railings on top. It is attached to the end of the cart shed, and north-east of it is a kennel building with a corrugated roof. There is a gap between the kennels and a barn, the final building in the row. It is open-fronted, with an old slate roof, now more or less disused but still in reasonable condition.

On the opposite side of the track is a small, derelict stone shed overgrown with ivy, and beside it an odd circular wall stub. The latter is not shown on the 1901 map. There is a further open-fronted, stone-built barn alongside the service drive leading east from the rear yard, opposite the walled gardens. This seems to have been rebuilt at some time as there is different stonework in the gable end, and the pillars supporting the open front are brick. It has a slate roof.

There is a small, derelict stone building on the western edge of the drying green which looks as though it may once have been an aviary, although it is not named as such on the 1901 map. Two other buildings, not now visible, are shown to the west of it on this map. There are roughly cut stone steps leading up to it and a dry-stone wall of large boulders alongside them.

The stone-built stable block is very grandiose and was probably contemporary with the previous house. There is a towered and castellated gateway with cottages either side; these have small gardens in front enclosed by iron railings set in a dwarf wall. Within is a large gravelled yard surrounded by stables, tack rooms and carriage sheds, all slate-roofed. Opposite the gateway a matching castellated section has two sets of double doors and a clock; this seems to be built thus purely for its appearance when looking in through the gateway. The large wooden doors remain in place in the entrance.

The park at Rhiwlas pre-dates the present house and almost certainly the last one, though to what extent the present layout is the result of modifications made at the time that the last house was built is difficult to say. The house was extravagant to a fault and it is unlikely that the park and garden would have been neglected; indeed, the main drive gateway was clearly contemporary with the house. However, the park had probably already been improved not long before, as a late eighteenth-century tourist noted that it was at that time being laid out

'under the auspices of Mr Emes', and it may therefore have escaped much modification.

The park lies mainly to the south, west and north-west of the house. The main drive leads off from the south-east corner, and the strip of woodland along this drive, although narrow, also covers a significant area, because of the length of the drive (almost 1 km).

The park falls into two main areas, to the south/south-west and north-west of the house. The Afon Tryweryn defines the west and south sides of the park, and runs all along the west side of the main drive. The part of the park south of the house falls gently towards the river, and the house, which faces south, thus looks out over the sloping pastureland, dotted with trees, to the river. The trees are mostly deciduous and include oak, beech, sycamore and lime.

The area of parkland to the north-west is completely different in character, and not visible from the house, being above it. It is steep, with rocky outcrops, and was formerly wooded; so many trees remain that although there is some poor-quality pasture it still has much of the character of open woodland. Trees are mainly oak, with a few sycamore and some conifers near the highest point. This area is shown as woodland on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of 1901 and is still known as Coed Mawr. There are a couple of small quarries here as well, doubtless used to supply stone for estate use. The remaining small area of park, north of the gardens, seems never to have had any trees and is simply a field, containing a small reservoir.

The wooded hill, Coed Mawr, had, in 1901, paths leading to a footbridge over the river to the west, out of the park to the north, and in a loop along part of the west side, presumably a pleasure walk. There was also a track leading round the north, east and south-east sides, joining the track leading west from the house which gave access to the above paths on the south, and the track leading alongside the barns and into the yard on the east. These paths and tracks are now all disused, but some can still be traced, notably the one round the east and south-east of the hill and that leading west from the house, which is fenced off from the park to the south.

There are also features shown on the 1901 map in the area immediately south of the house, which used to be fenced off and mown. These include a levelled area, possibly a croquet lawn, with a small plantation at its south-west corner, perhaps to provide some shade, and a long bank or terrace running east-west above this which may be an earlier fence line. Slight traces of these features can still be seen. A new tennis court has been constructed near the start of the main drive, on the far side of it.

The long main drive is a feature of the park, being flanked by superb, mainly deciduous trees, notably beech and oak and including some fern-leaved beeches planted in the 1860s. At the south end there are some horse and sweet chestnuts. The river runs alongside the drive from the point where it leaves the south-east corner of the park, and is both visible and audible most of the way, though some way below the level of the drive. The grand, castellated, gothic gateway at the end is a landmark on entering or leaving Bala at the north-east end, and there is also a gothic lodge. Coming up the drive, from the point where the end of the woodland is reached there are views towards the house across the park. This drive is still passable by vehicles but

is no longer used, the east service drive having become the main approach.

The east drive is surfaced with tarmac and the entrance to it is from the public road along the east side of the park, opposite the stables, which are on the other side of the road. There is also a gravelled service drive which runs from the back of the yard behind the house off to the east, along the north wall of the kitchen garden, meeting the public road to the east about 200 m north of the entrance to the east drive.

An ice-house was recorded beside the river, with an entrance on the south-west through a small passage under a mound set in the slope, but this appears no longer to exist. An interesting adjunct to this was ice-collecting pools made in the river but there is now no trace of them.

A ha-ha between the garden and park was built in the 1970s and consists of a mortared wall of shaped stones, just over 1 m high. The square, dumpy, stone-built piers at either end are remnants of an earlier wall, and the third similar pier on the other side of the entrance to the track which leads off to the west here is clearly contemporary. As the land slopes away on the park side of the ha-ha there is no ditch.

The garden is basically in two parts, the steep rockery, lawn and shrubbery to the west and the woodland walk and semi-formal gardens to the east. The latter area is nineteenth-century in style, and some of the trees which help to define it are known to have been planted in the 1860s; the western area contains some more recent planting and a probably late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century rockery, but has some earlier elements, notably a wall thought to date from the sixteenth century.

The two main areas of the garden contrast rather sharply geographically, that to the west being on a steep slope and that to the east being on fairly level ground. Both, however, are irregularly-shaped areas (roughly triangular) and have been treated predominantly informally.

The rockery to the south of the western area has more or less disappeared, but was obviously on a large scale, with plantings of shrubs and trees. The open slope next to it seems to have been open at least since the turn of the nineteenth century, providing a view up to the wooded part of the park. The area north of this was at least partly built over by the larger previous house on the site, and has hence undergone some changes, with rather modern planting at present, but there is older woodland to the north again.

Almost half of the flatter area on the east is taken up by the kitchen gardens. Most of the rest is given over to a typical nineteenth-century shrubbery or woodland walk, which has become rather overgrown and is in the process of being opened up again. The shrubbery, and the area north of the east drive, is probably on the site of natural oak woodland, and some old oaks have been left in place. Amongst them other trees have been planted at various times, including yew, holly, a purple-leaved type of prunus, birch, firs and acers. The older shrubs consist mainly of rhododendron and laurel, but including some good varieties of rhododendron, and in the western area holly, box and yew also seem to have been used as underplanting.

The area of lawns and ornamental plantings to the north, between this and the south wall of the kitchen garden, is probably contemporary, taking advantage of a warm sunny spot, both for growing roses and other plants which need an open situation, and for recreational purposes.

There are some small, more formal areas of garden near the house, but most of these post-date the demolition of the large mansion and have been developed on parts of its site. The oldest garden feature appears to be a wall with steps through at the foot of the slope on the west of the house, and this, with the levelled area at its foot, in front of the house, has survived several rebuildings of the mansion. At the time of the last house, at least, the level area was gravelled, but has recently become lawn, and the area to the east and south-east of the house (partly under the previous house) now provides a gravelled turning space.

South of the western walled garden were three very large elms, one of which still stands although dead. The stump of one of those which has been cut down is about 2 m in diameter. A large lime survives nearby.

The grassy strip north of the east drive contains some oaks which probably remain from the original natural woodland. To these have been added other trees, including birch, beech, pines and other conifers but most notably a magnificent group of giant sequoias or Wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), which sweeps across the east drive to the south side, continuing south until it meets the top of the plantation alongside the old main drive to the south-east. These trees are not planted as a formal avenue, but in unusual numbers, and they include some superb specimens. With the big firs in the shrubbery and some others of the older conifers, they were planted in the 1860s by the present owner's great-grandfather.

There are two kitchen gardens, the eastern being the larger, and rectangular, with its long axis east-west. It was divided into four parts by paths, the two northern areas being smaller as there were several large glasshouses along and in front of the north wall. The smaller western garden is an irregular shape and contained only one glasshouse. Both are walled all round with brick and stone walls, and are likely to be contemporary with the early nineteenth-century house, although as the brick is hand-made an earlier date is possible.

The layout of the main garden remains fairly clear, although the eastern part of the east-west path has fallen out of use. The southern part of the north-south path, which is of hard gravel, now runs down the centre of a stone-edged double border full of shrub roses, backed by beech hedges planted in 1987. There are old iron arches at either end, with climbing roses and wistaria.

The eastern half of the garden is now all rough grass, used as a hen run, with a few old fruit trees. In the northern part of it the foundations of old glasshouses can be seen, the vine house against the wall and the sunken melon pit just to the south. The south-west quadrant is also rough grass with a few fruit trees, and has a small pond for ducks.

At the crossing of east-west and north-south paths is a raised circular bed with an ivy-covered retaining wall and ornamental planting. North of this, three parallel paths lead off to the

north, creating two wide borders between them, currently full of dahlias. This arrangement is shown on the 1901 map.

The outer paths are edged with bricks set diagonally on edge, and the remaining part of the east-west path, like the southern part of the north-south one, with stone. The rest of the north-south path has no edging, but grass strips divide it from the border.

Iron arches similar to those at the ends of the southern part of the north-south path also span the entrance to the path leading west, and where the entrance to the east path must have been. The one at the south end of the north-south path has probably been moved from the entrance to the north half of the same path.

The east-west path along the south of the garden is lost, but ran close to the wall as can be seen from the entrances to it off the central path. The northern one remains on the west, and is set well south of the wall as all the glasshouses were north of it. Nothing survives of the old glasshouses except the bases, now utilised in other ways, but there are now two small, free-standing modern greenhouses and a frame with a little corrugated pot store in the area. Some of the paving is probably original. One of the lost glasshouses was probably the pear house, for which plans dated 1869 exist.

East of the greenhouses is a roughly-built raised bed containing roses, and two slate water tanks now planted up. One of these is exceptionally long and narrow, and was perhaps originally constructed to fit into a particular restricted space. At the west end of the old glasshouse area is a pair of slate tanks, still functional, with an ingenious drop-side arrangement to make it easy to reach the water when the level is low.

The base of the peach house, along the western part of the north wall, has been made into a raised bed, and the area in front of it is a vegetable bed, partly full of dahlias. On the south side of the path is a row of sturdy old fruit trees, some of which show signs of having been trained as espaliers. They are no longer trained but are kept well pruned back. Between these and the central east-west path is a fruit cage and vegetable beds. The strip west of the north part of the western north-south path is kept for compost and rubbish heaps.

No old fruit trees remain against the walls but there are some fairly young pears on the north wall behind one of the greenhouses. The walls are all brick on the inside, except for a stretch around the doorway in the west wall and one in the middle of the north wall, and the top of the north wall, which has been raised in stone. The north wall is stone on the outside, the south wall brick, and the other two cannot be seen. The walls are between 2 m and 3 m high and show much evidence of collapse and repair (their current state is giving some cause for concern). A wide entrance, now blocked with corrugated iron and disused, near the north-west corner, seems to have been inserted later as it is edged with more modern brick. The doors in the south and west walls and in the north wall near the north-east corner are undoubtedly original; the last two still have wooden doors. The central door in the north wall leads through into a range of buildings outside the wall, of which only part remains; the part which has gone presumably included the boiler house.

The western garden is now disused and inaccessible, but seems to contain some fruit trees, including some on the walls. These are lower than those of the east garden (about 2 m), and built of stone; the south wall is not quite flush with the south wall of the east garden, so that there is a kink back at the join, suggesting that the western garden was added later. The walls are dry-stone with a long-and-short top course. There are entrances to this area from the eastern garden and from outside, through the west wall and through the north wall in the north-east corner, the last two still with wooden doors but all disused.

The 1901 map shows another glasshouse in a small area north of the now disused tennis court. Nothing of this can be seen but the remains of a little lean-to building near the entrance to the service drive may be its boiler house.

North of the service drive, opposite the garden wall, the old map shows more buildings, glasshouses and tanks. These must have been associated with the garden, and the derelict remains of a building with a small yard attached remain. This may perhaps have been the bothy. There are also two cottages nearby.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mr R. Price

Rhiwlas papers in district archives, Dolgellau (Z/DDD), notably plans for a pear house dated 1869 (6/4), garden account book 1882-1888 (1/30), and photographs 8/125 (1901), 8/58 (Shooting party, 1904) and 8/126 (Monkey puzzle garden, undated).

Secondary

Beamon, S P, and Roaf, S, *The Ice-Houses of Britain* (1990).

Whittle, E, *The Historic Gardens of Wales* (1992)