

## PLAS GWYNANT

<b>Ref No</b>	PGW (Gd) 16 (GWY)
<b>OS Map</b>	115
<b>Grid Ref</b>	SH 631 505
<b>Former County</b>	Gwynedd
<b>Unitary Authority</b>	Gwynedd
<b>Community Council</b>	Beddgelert
<b>Designations</b>	Snowdonia National Park
<b>Site Evaluation</b>	<b>Grade II</b>

**Primary reasons for grading** Good example of the use of a natural 'romantic' landscape in creating a small garden; superb site and views; well-preserved park landscape.

**Type of Site** Parkland, woods, riverside walks, lawned terraces, rockery, walled garden.

**Main Phases of Construction** Early nineteenth century

### SITE DESCRIPTION

Plas Gwynant, situated on a south-west-facing slope in the beautiful valley of Nant Gwynant, just north-east of Beddgelert, is a dark stone two-storey house, unequally double-fronted, with gables. There is a two-storey stone extension on the south-east end (possibly part of an older house), and a very modern single-storey brick one on the north-west, added as part of the outdoor pursuits centre, which the house has now become. Levelling of the site for this and the parking space next to it has created a grassy bank leading down to the park level; this may also be how the terraces in front of the house came to be constructed.

The estate was acquired by Daniel Vawdrey in 1803, at which time it was a farm centred on Hafod Tan-y-graig, to the south-east; Vawdrey built the house, but as the existing building appears to be mid nineteenth-century or later in date, it may be a rebuild of the early nineteenth-century house. The house shown on an estate map dating from before 1830 certainly appears much smaller than the present building.

The former stable building, located just within the garden area, north-west of the house, is rectangular, single-storey with a loft, stone-built and slate-roofed. There are three arches at the front; one of these is now blocked but contains a window, one is left open, and the third is

partially blocked, with half-height double doors. There are small, probably original, stone lean-tos at either end. The building may be contemporary with the rebuilding of the main house, as it is not shown on the pre-1830 estate map, but is sketched as an addition to another plan of around the same date. It has now been converted for use by the outdoor pursuits centre.

In front is a level gravel area partly enclosed by a modern or rebuilt low, mortared stone wall; a grassy slope below this leads down to the drive. The rebuilt wall seems to be on the line of a wall shown on the 1914 map, which enclosed a small area in front and to either side of the building. Part of this remains (a dilapidated dry-stone wall) near the west corner of the building, and on the south-east it doubles as the wall of the small enclosed former kitchen garden next to the stables. At the back, as the stable building is cut into the base of the hill-slope, this wall acts as a retaining wall.

A small, stone, formerly open-fronted barn with a slate roof, probably roughly contemporary with the rest of the farm buildings on the estate (mid to late nineteenth century), lies to the north-west of the house. An apparently smaller building is shown in the same position on the pre-1830 estate map. The barn was presumably for use in connection with park livestock as it opened on to the park; the front has now been filled in and it is used as extra accommodation for the outdoor pursuits centre. There is a second building at right-angles at the east corner, which looks contemporary but is not shown on the 1914 25 in. Ordnance Survey map. There is a small level area in front of the barn which is retained by a low dry-stone wall. The barn is on the line of the old boundary wall between the park and woodland.

Behind the house, on the far side of a narrow levelled area, are three sheds, one stone, one wooden on old stone foundations and one (the largest) wooden on a brick base. The former may be nineteenth-century, the others clearly are not, but three buildings are shown in similar positions on the 1914 map, and there are some further stone wall stubs nearby. The large circular water tank to the east is also shown on this map.

The site was bought, as a farm, by Daniel Vawdrey in 1803, the only residence at that time being the farmhouse, Hafod Tan-y-graig, which lies a little further up the Llynedno valley, to the south-east. Vawdrey built the larger house shortly afterwards, and married a Wyatt of the local family of architects, by one of whom neighbouring Bryn Gwynant was built in the 1830s. Vawdrey was very much interested in forestry, and from the beginning began planting large areas of woodland on his estate, laying the foundation of the several large commercial plantations which are still present near Plas Gwynant. By 1818 the hill to the south-west of the house was wooded, the river valley south-east of the house had been planted, and a plantation had been established on the south side of the higher hill, which has a picturesque walk and viewpoint, to the north; before 1830 the latter was planted all over the south and west sides, and by 1914 was completely afforested, as was a large area to the east of the house.

The house remained in the possession of the Vawdreys until the 1950s, and other portions of the estate are still in the hands of members of the family. They did not always live in the house, however, and especially in more recent times it was often let, tenants having included the writer Kingsley Amis, Percy Spooner of the Ffestiniog Railway, and other well-known

characters.

In the 1950s the estate was divided up and sold in separate lots. Most of the cottages on the estate are now holiday homes, including the gardener's house beside the kitchen garden, but Hafod Tan-y-graig is permanently inhabited. The main house has become an outdoor pursuits centre and retains part of the garden and park.

Plas Gwynant park occupies a splendid site in Nant Gwynant, a valley famous for its beauty and much prized by those interested in the romantic, but without a road until relatively late, and thus open only to the most intrepid of tourists before the nineteenth century. It lies between the two lakes in the valley, Llyn Gwynant and Llyn Dinas, at a point where the Llynedno, a substantial tributary, joins the Afon Glaslyn. The presence of this river, with its waterfalls, was clearly significant to the choice of site, but the view south-west down the valley and the sheltering hills to south and north must have been scarcely less important.

The house is situated a little way up the slope above the Afon Llynedno, facing south-west across the park and down Nant Gwynant towards Beddgelert and Moel Hebog - a distinctly romantic view. The walks in the woods to the north of the house lead up to a crag from which an even better view down the valley can be obtained.

The park falls into three main areas. The first of these is a relatively low-lying, rather wet triangular area west and north-west of the house, along the north-eastern edge of which the main approach runs. The southern edge is formed by the river, and a few drains cross the parkland and empty into it. There is a good deal of *Juncus* growing in this area, which is grazed by sheep, but despite the tendency to waterlogging this part of the park was the focus for planting with exotic conifers, of which many good specimens, singly and in groups, remain. Although the house looks out across only a narrow part of the area, near the point of the triangle (where there are few trees; this part may once have been maintained as lawn), it is nevertheless the part of the park most closely associated with the house, and through which the drive runs.

The second area is level and also rather wet, with several drains, and is separated from the first area by the Afon Llynedno. It lies to the south-west of the house and is more agricultural in character than the first area, although still only used for grazing. The view from the house to the distant mountains is across this part of the park, which accordingly is sparsely planted with trees, and those mostly around the edges. The farm buildings lie in a group on the south-eastern boundary of this area, with a large stone Dutch barn close to the river, about half way to the house but screened from it by trees and rhododendrons growing alongside the river. The house nearest to the farm buildings, Ty'n-y-coed, is a short distance to the south-west, and although now a holiday cottage was probably built as the farmhouse, to replace the tiny cottage amongst the farm buildings.

The third area of parkland is in two enclosures, either side of the minor road to the south of the house. It slopes quite steeply, being on the southern slope of the main valley of the Afon Glaslyn. It is again grazed pasture, with scattered deciduous trees. It is separated from the second area, to the north, by the farm buildings and a track which runs along on the south,

above them; above this there is a leat, now dry, which once carried water from an ornamental pond in the garden area beside the Afon Llynedno down past the farm buildings and away in a ditch across the second park area.

There is a small field alongside the road, north of the house, now belonging to Pen-rhiw-goch, a holiday cottage, which might be considered to be part of the park, although it seems never to have been planted with specimen trees.

The two large areas of woodland, to the north and south-west of the house, crown craggy outcrops on the valley side. Both were planted, originally by Daniel Vawdrey, as mixed woodland and form part of the designed landscape, and that on the north contains several paths which constituted a well-known picturesque walk, leading to a viewpoint on the top. This plantation has now been largely taken over by commercial conifers.

Smaller areas of woodland surround the ruined mill south-south-east of the house, and Hafod Tan-y-graig slightly further east; the latter is divided from the main area of woodland to the north-east only by the drive and contains some exotic species.

The main drive from the gate and lodge at the north corner of the park is tarmac-surfaced and unfenced, rising gently towards the house. The lodge is single-storey, stone-built and slate-roofed, with an attic, and has been extended both to north-west and south-east. The drive now leads off a lay-by created by the straightening of the main road through Nant Gwynant, but otherwise seems to have followed much the same route as it now does from 1818 at least.

The drive to Hafod Tan-y-graig branches off the main drive, to the south-east, just past the small converted barn, and runs along the outer edge of the garden (the kitchen garden, however, is on the far side of it). This is a later addition, giving separate access to Hafod Tan-y-graig, and was constructed at some time between about 1830 and 1914. One early plan has a similar drive pencilled in, but this passes closer to the back of Plas Gwynant than the current route.

Another track branches off the main drive, this time leading south, just before the garden entrance. It crosses part of the park and then the river, cutting across the corner of the second area of parkland to the farm buildings. On the far side of the river it is grass-surfaced.

There are other old tracks, mostly disused, in the southern part of the park, and a short stretch of public road, part of which also forms the south-western boundary. Tracks serving the mill buildings beyond the southern boundary of the garden (across the Afon Llynedno from Hafod Tan-y-graig) have become lost except for the main route, which leads down through a gate from the minor road to the south, and although almost a tunnel through rhododendron, retains its stony surface and bits of walling and revetting in the sides where necessary.

The continuation of this track to the north, towards the farm buildings, is impassable at first, through the woodland and undergrowth at the edge of the garden; but later it turns westwards and emerges into the parkland above the Dutch barn by the river. It is levelled into the slope,

with a dry-stone retaining wall on the upper side. Near the farm buildings it joins a similar track which leads to the Dutch barn (from where there is a footpath back into the garden), and continues along behind the buildings and up towards Ty'n-y-coed, with a branch off through the farm buildings which meets the track coming across the park from the north. All these tracks have fairly hard but grassy surfaces. They are probably mostly nineteenth-century in date, as the pre-1830 map shows few of them, but several are pencilled in as additions on another version of this map.

The picturesque walk, along the original, specially made path to the viewpoint in the woods to the north of the house, is still accessible, though some of the alternative paths are overgrown. The path is steep, informal and unsurfaced, but has sitting places and intermediate view points on the way up.

The actual garden area, as opposed to the park, which is relatively large, is quite small, and focused on the Afon Llynedno and its waterfalls. There are low, semi-formal terraces in front of the house, giving views both distant, over the valley and Moel Hebog, and close at hand, to the lower waterfall. To the south-east there is a rockery area with a pool and almost a grotto, but apart from a walled area of woodland behind the house and stables, almost all of the rest consists of a riverside walk. This runs on both sides of the river, and is currently being restored and replanted on the south-west; most of the north-east side is very overgrown with trees and rhododendron, and may always have had a more wooded character than the other side.

The riverside area has naturally outcropping rocks, through which paths wind, and there are also several small watercourses which are attractive to look at, although the sound of the water can in most cases scarcely be heard over the rushing of the main river. In 1914 there were three bridges; one at the northern end of the riverside walk area, on the path between the house and the Dutch barn; one between the two waterfalls, which seems to have formed an alternative crossing point for a shortened circular walk up one side and down the other; and a high, arched bridge at the southern end of the garden which carried a track across between Hafod Tan-y-graig and the mill. Only the first of these is shown on the pre-1830 map, and only the last remains, but it has been damaged over the years by falling trees, so that it now carries only a footpath. The two foot-bridges have gone, to be replaced by a single somewhat ramshackle affair, probably on or close to the site of the upper of the original bridges.

The river carries quite a large volume of water and the waterfalls, while not spectacular, being more in the nature of steep rapids than clear falls, are certainly an attractive feature and contribute much to the atmosphere of the garden. The lower is visible from the house terraces and the areas around, but the upper only from certain points on the riverside walk, the paths doubtless having been laid out with this in mind. Originally there would probably have been a view of the river from almost the full length of the walk either side, but now that the river banks are overgrown with rhododendron and trees this is no longer the case. The river bed within this area appears to be entirely natural, apart from some small patches of walling in the banks which are probably meant to help prevent erosion. The path on the south-west used to come up to meet the track over the arched bridge at the end of the garden, and as the ground rises quite steeply to this point there would probably have been good views from here back

down the valley and perhaps to the house, but this part of the path is now impassable.

The area south-west of the river contains a small ornamental pond, now holding very little water but in the process of being reclaimed; the surroundings of this have many little watercourses with slate slab bridges and are being replanted with varieties of rhododendrons and other shrubs, replacing either other choice plants which were swamped by a tide of *R. ponticum*, or original plantings of this pernicious invader itself - perhaps more likely the latter.

There is an enclosed wooded area at the back of the house and stables, the central part of which appears never to have been underplanted with rhododendron, although this is present at either end. This woodland falls within the area of the garden, but retains a natural character.

Other small areas close to the house are planted with ornamental shrubs. The area now occupied by the extension to the house and the car park seems, from the 1914 map, to have been a lawn surrounded with trees and shrubbery, with a carriage turning area at the house end.

The main kitchen garden lies east-north-east of the house, on the far side of the drive to Hafod Tan-y-graig. It would have been reached from the house by following the diagonal path crossing the enclosed woodland and then turning south-east along Hafod Tan-y-graig's drive, from where a steep path with a few rough steps at the bottom ascends to the gardener's house, which is on the outside of the garden, against the north-west wall, at the north corner.

The gardener's house, now used as a holiday cottage, is two-storey, stone-built and slate-roofed, with a porch supported on wooden pillars. This porch has decorative barge-boards, which have recently been renewed (as has the roof), and the door is approached by slate steps. There is a small stone shed built as a lean-to against a rock face a short distance away to the north-west (not shown on the 1914 map).

The garden has a high, dry-stone wall with the top course on edge, and without any brick lining. It is around 2 m high, more in places, and has been repaired to keep it in reasonable condition. The north-west wall at least seems to have been raised, unless the course of stones on edge about half way up is purely decorative. There are entrances through the middle of the north-west wall and slightly higher up in the south-east wall, both with modern wooden doors; a former doorway through the north-east wall, near the entrance to the boiler house and probably leading into the glasshouse which once stood here, has been partially blocked, leaving a window opening.

The east corner of the garden is truncated, suggesting perhaps that the footpath which passes here was pre-existing and well-used; there is also a stream, with walling to keep it off the path, although the stream is not shown on maps. Another path leading back to Pen-rhiw-goch and to the complex of paths on the wooded crag, still used to some extent, leads off through the woods a little further north. The first footpath no longer seems to be used leading up into the woods above, but past the garden, going down, becomes a wide, hard-surfaced track, revetted on both sides and evidently intended for vehicular use. The woods around all these paths, being the edges of the main wooded area to the north-east, are thickly underplanted with rhododendron

and contain added conifers, some relatively young. The area of woodland to the south-east now seems to consist entirely of a plantation of commercial conifers.

The garden now belongs to the gardener's house, and is more or less disused. Within it there are four sloping terraces, retained by dry-stone walls, not all the same height and the highest over 1 m. There are a couple of small sheds in the garden, one wooden and one more substantial, the latter against the north-west wall. A few youngish trees, mostly conifers, have been planted on the upper terraces, and a few fruit trees survive near the walls. The glasshouse, which was in the north corner close to the gardener's cottage, has gone, but its position is marked by slate coping on the wall in place of the stones on edge used elsewhere. The boiler house, outside the garden wall behind the glasshouse site, is underground; another small building marked nearby on the 1914 map has gone.

The garden is not shown on the pre-1830 map, and although a rectangle marked 'orch' is pencilled in on another version of this plan, it is in a different place (near the rockery) and seems never to have been constructed. The existing garden may be contemporary with the rebuilding of the house.

A small, former kitchen garden lies immediately south-east of the stables, a short distance north-west of the house. The former rear drive runs along the south-west side, and here only the stub of the wall, much overgrown, remains. The wall is also mostly down on the south-east side but on the other two sides it remains, a dry-stone wall between 1.5 m and 2.5 m high, depending on the (uneven) terrain, but in poor condition. The only remaining visible entrance is a blocked doorway near the west corner. The blocking seems to be fairly recent, as it extends only to the reduced height of the partly collapsed wall, and the stone is so similar to that of the wall either side that it seems likely the wall was repaired, and spare stone used to block the doorway, all at one time.

Practically no internal detail is visible, but the 1914 map shows a glasshouse in the north corner, and the site of this can still be seen, though there are no visible remains of the building except that the wall is mortared. This corner is the least overgrown, and it is just possible to see a line of apparently cut stones running more or less parallel with the north-east wall, which may be a path edging or the remains of the cold frame which is also shown in this area on the 1914 map.

It seems likely that this small garden would have been the first kitchen garden, later augmented and perhaps eventually superseded by the large kitchen garden to the south-east. It is not shown on the pre-1830 map but is pencilled in in approximately its present position on another version of this plan. It probably remained in some form of use until fairly recently, however, as despite its overgrown state there are no self-sown trees of any size within it.

## Sources

## **Primary**

Information from Ms Margaret Griffith, including photocopies of documents in her possession

Information from Principal of outdoor pursuits centre (D. Firth)

2-in. manuscript map for 1st edition 1-in. Ordnance Survey map (1818)