PLAS MACHYNLLETH

Ref No	PGW (Po) 26 (POW)
OS Map	135
Grid Ref	SH 745004
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Montgomeryshire
Community Council	Machynlleth
Designations	Listed Buildings: House (Grade II*); Llynlloedd (Grade II*)
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Site Evaluation Primary reasons for grading	Grade II The survival of much of an important and attractive Victorian park, in a fine natural setting, on the edge of Machynlleth. The mansion house became home to the marquesses of Londonderry, who owned extensive estates in the area. House and garden were later given to the town as a public park. The historical development of the site reflects that of the town.
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SITE DESCRIPTION

Plas Machynlleth stands on the southern edge of the ancient and historic town of Machynlleth set back off the Pentrerhedyn road behind a high stone wall on the north-west edge of a small park. The house faces east and south and it comprises a main central square rendered block of three storeys and four bays with a hipped slate roof. On the east, and entrance, front there is a large portico supported by five Ionic columns. Over the central two bays is a pediment set with a datestone of 1653. Small wings extend to the north-east and south-east of this block, the south-east wing being an elongated bay, an extension of the dining room. Sash French windows open out from this on to the garden beyond. A second three-storeyed range

attaches to the main block on the south. This block is also rendered and has a hipped slate roof but is executed in a Gothick style with pointed arch windows with iron glazing bars. On the north of the main block a new range has been erected replacing an earlier servants' wing and billiard room. This wing is styled as a stables and it contains an audio/visual exhibition, part of the Celtica museum.

The history of Plas Machynlleth is intimately connected to that of nearby Llynlloedd, a substantial farmhouse situated towards the south-east side of the park. Llynlloedd was in the possession of the Owen family from at least the fifteenth century. In the early eighteenth century Thomas Owen of Llynlloedd married Anne Edwards, daughter of Lewis Edwards of Talgarth and brother of John Edwards. John married his sister's grand-daughter, Cornelia, thus forming a strong link between the two families. In the 1750s John Edwards (died 1789) bought the Plas Machynlleth property and by about 1765 had built a brick three-storey. double-pile house, originally called 'Greenfields', which now forms the core of the main east block of the present building. Remnants of earlier buildings have been found during building works. John Edwards's son, also John (awarded a baronetcy in 1838), married Harriet Johnson, widow of John Herbert, owner of Llvnlloedd. Herbert was the son of Averina, Thomas Owen's daughter, who inherited Llynlloedd from her father. Sir John Edwards retired from politics (he had been a local MP) in 1841 and retired to Plas Machynlleth. He devoted the next nine years, until his death in 1850, to the improvement of the house and estate. Sir John extended and remodelled the house, adding the north and south wings and the east front facade and dining room extension. The entrance was switched from the north to the east side and the portico added. Edward Haycock of Shrewsbury is credited with much of the work. The last addition, after 1845, was a north range, now demolished. On Sir John's death Plas Machynlleth passed to George Vane-Tempest, later the 5th Marguess of Londonderry (died 1884), who had married Sir John's daughter and heiress, Mary Cornelia, in 1846. The house was used as the family's main home. The marquess and marchioness were great benefactors of the town and supported the Newtown and Machynlleth railway and innovations in agriculture. On the 5th Marguess's death his eldest son, the 6th Marguess, went to live at the family's other estate, Wynyard Park, County Durham. By 1888 the house had been renamed 'Plas Machynlleth' and by 1900 the datestone incorporated. In 1896 and 1911 Plas Machynlleth received royal visits and on both occasions the royal party planted trees in the grounds. In 1931 the vast landholdings of the Londonderry family were sold off following the death of Lord Herbert Vane-Tempest, who had been killed in a railway accident in 1921. During the 1930s the house was closed up and in the Second World War was used as a girls' school. In 1948 the 7th Marguess gave the Plas and 40 acres of parkland to the town of Machynlleth. The grounds were opened as a public park and the Plas run as council offices. During the 1990s the Plas was remodelled and opened as 'Celtica', an interactive museum and major Welsh tourist attraction.

The former coach house, stables and kennels, dating to about 1840, lie to the west of the house abutting the north boundary wall. They are ranged around a U-shaped courtyard and are of grey rubble stone, with low slate hipped roofs. A two-storey accommodation range lies against the north boundary wall, set between stables and tack rooms, with a central octagonal bellcote on the roof. On the south the stables are enclosed by a high stone-capped wall, creating the yard, partly surfaced in old bricks in a herringbone pattern, to the south of which an earth bank rises through a small scrub woodland to one of the new Celtica car parks. A

small iron gate leads into the yard near the north-east corner. The north range of the stables is used as a house and is presently lived in by the daughter of the last huntsman who looked after the Londonderry hounds. The other ranges are partly derelict and the south part of the yard has been turned into a simple garden.

A service entrance connects to the stables off the main Pentrerhedyn road (A 487) about 60m down the boundary wall from a new entrance to the north of the house. The wall connects to two tall and narrow pyramidal stone capped piers which are set back by about 1m off the road side pavement. There are no gates. The gateway enters a narrow lane, enclosed on the south by a high stone wall. To the west are the stables and to the east the narrow lane continues to the west side of the house. A new wing on the north of the house blocks the passage of this lane which used to run as a service drive towards the walled kitchen garden and the Plas Drive. At the west of the house a branch breaks off the lane to the south-east to enter a small staff car park.

Abutting the stables on the west is a contemporary, narrow, triangular yard, enclosed on the north by the outer stone boundary wall and on the south by a continuation of the wall which runs along the south of the stable yard. This enclosure was originally the kennels and stores and is now a council workyard. A few partly derelict stone buildings abut the interior east and north walls. A blocked up access in the east wall connected into the stable yard beyond.

The park of Plas Machynlleth lies to the south and east of the house, bounded on the north by the garden and the town and on the remaining sides by field boundaries. The dry-stone park boundary wall can be traced for much of its length and entrances are flanked by simple, round-topped, upright stone piers. The main approach was from entrance gates on Maengwyn Street, to the north-east of the house, along a gently curving drive to the east front of the house. A lodge, North, or Norbury Lodge, stands to the east of the drive. The drive is now a path within the gardens. Another drive ran westwards from the east front, on the edge of the garden, to an entrance and lodge, West Lodge, on the west boundary. The lodge remains as a private house and only a short stretch of drive survives. Both lodges are of the same date, the North Lodge being under construction in May 1840. On the south-east boundary there was originally a drive from Forge Road to Llynlloedd, but this has now gone. Another drive, from Llynlloedd to the town, which ran to the west of the present drive to Llynlloedd, has also gone. This was the earliest drive across what was to become the park, being shown on the 1828 map. It was still in existence in 1886 and one gatepost of its entrance remains at Bank Lane. The present drive to Llynlloedd is also shown on the 1886 map. The stone wall along the northern and north-eastern boundary of the property can still be traced for much of its length, although it has been lowered in places and there are now modern developments within it. A strip of planting along the north-east boundary is shown on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map. In the nineteenth century there were hound kennels on the north-eastern boundary which were later moved to north-east of Llynlloedd, where they remain.

Level parkland rolls gently from the garden boundary towards Llynlloedd. It is divided into a few large fields - Plas Field (Cae Glas) in front of the house and now containing sports fields, The Park (Cae Parc) to its east, Lodge Field and House Field to the south. To the east of the straight drive from Llynlloedd to the town are two further fields - The Clover (Clover Mawr or Cae Moch) and Peat Field (Cae Mawnog), a poorly drained field to its south-east. On the

south-east side the park extends into an area of rising ground broken by rocky ridges, beyond which is moorland common.

To the south of the park the ground rises and the wooded slope of Coed Llynlloedd forms an attractive backdrop to the park. At the south-west end of the park the ground rises steeply to a ridge, with a number of small summits from which there are panoramic views both down to the park and town to the north and also to the dramatic countryside to the south and west. This area of about 15 ha. is known as the Ffridd, or Summerhouse Hill.

Ornamental planting within the park was concentrated on the level ground near the house. Deciduous trees, mostly oak, are planted informally. Beech and sycamore are planted along the south and south-east boundaries and the rocky outcrops at the south and south-east ends of the park are planted with oak, beech, ash and cherry. Today most of the ornamental planting remains at the west end of the park, in Lodge Field. The majority of the trees are oaks but along the boundary with Coed Llynlloedd there are some huge mature beech trees. Lodge Field has a small stream and low, ruinous stone wall along its west side and is separated from Plas Field by iron railings. The latter originally contained many parkland trees but these have now been replaced by playing fields. The next field to the east, The Park, still has many parkland trees, including two oaks which may be hedgerow remnants from a field boundary removed to make the park. To the south is House Field (Cae Croglofft), originally separated from The Park by iron railings. There are no trees in this field but it formerly contained oak, ornamental conifers and walnut. At the west end of this field is a rocky outcrop planted with deciduous trees. At the east end is a stream that divides the field from Pond Field (Cae Llyn), which lies to the south of Llynlloedd.

Pond Field is the westernmost of a number of fields around Llynlloedd which were incorporated into the Plas Machynlleth park. These, together with the fields to the east of the drive to Llynlloedd, are known as Parc Llynlloedd. The character of this area is different from that closer to the Plas: the ground rises unevenly towards the south-east and is broken by a number of rocky ridges. Pond Field is a sloping, rolling grass field, which formerly contained a row of oaks, some of which were felled to erect a power line. The park wall along its south side is partly ruinous; towards the west end it is complete and stands to about 1 m high. On the boundary are some large mature sycamore trees and a large lime in the south-west corner. Further sycamores are planted just outside the park, in Coed Llynlloedd. At its north end, south of the Llynlloedd farm buildings, is a rocky ridge planted with oak, sycamore and beech trees. A stream runs southwards down the east side of this field to a small pond in the northeast corner. To the north-east is Cae Larkin, which contains two rocky outcrops, one wooded, and a quarry from which a Mr Larkin dug stone in order to build a chapel. The north-west side is bounded by a dry-stone wall, which survives in places to its full height of about 1.5 m, along which there are some large mature sycamore, ash and oak trees. To the south is Butcher's Field (Ffridd Fach), so called because meat was hung from the two large oaks next to the stream for the hounds. Large iron nails embedded in the trunks indicate this use. The field contains many deciduous trees, with oaks and cherries along the boundary with Coed Llynlloedd. To the north is an open grass field, Cae Maen, bounded on the west by a rocky, wooded ridge (in Cae Larkin). The park wall along the east side of this field stands up to about 1.3 m at the north end and 1.6 m at the south end. An entrance at the south end is flanked by a single rounded stone pier and there is another single one half way along the track which runs along the south side of the field to the farm buildings.

The north-east part of the park, east of the Llynlloedd drive, was largely utilitarian, although enclosed within the park wall. At the south end is Cae Mawnog, which was used by the gardeners of the Plas as a source of peat. It is ill-drained and rushy and formerly contained a stagnant lake (Llyn Llonydd), which was drained by a stone-lined culvert, now replaced. This was built as part of the major improvements of about 1840 by Sir John Edwards. The culvert discharges into a ditch which crosses Cae Glas and Lodge Field and then passes under the Plas grounds between the house and stables and under the main road. To the north of Cae Mawnog is the Hospital Field, on the north end of which the hospital was built. It was formerly known as Cae Moch (Pig Field) or Clover Mawr. This field was used for crop rotation and never contained parkland trees. It does, however, have a wooded outcrop at its south end and once contained a small orchard.

The Ffridd, or Summerhouse Hill, is an outlying part of the park that was ornamented with trees, a pond and a summerhouse. It was reached by a drive which ran south from the Plas along the west side of The Park and House Field, then eastwards along the park boundary for a short distance. It then turned sharply to the west and climbed the slope up through Coed Llynlloedd and zig-zagged up the east side of the Ffridd. Within Coed Llynlloedd and the Ffridd this remains as a track, which continues southwards and eastwards on a winding route over rolling upland, eventually ending up at Lord Herbert's Lake (Llyn Glanmerin), a lake about 1.5 km south of the Plas, on which there was a boathouse. Ice was taken from here for storage in the ice-house and the lake was a frequent destination for Londonderry family outings. In Coed Llynlloedd the drive is lined on its lower side with large, mature beech and ash trees and on the western side of the Ffridd it is flanked by two large oaks and by a large, spreading beech tree on a bluff just below it. Tree stumps on the Ffridd show that it was formerly dotted with more ornamental trees. A number of oaks and beech trees do survive but some were felled to make way for a power line. A straight track leads westwards off the main track to the west boundary of the park. The west end of this is followed by a ruinous dry-stone wall, which then runs south up the slope and just short of the summit turns eastwards. This is the parish boundary wall. From the summit of the Ffridd, towards its south end, there are magnificent views in all directions. The summerhouse, of which there is no visible trace, was reached by a short spur from the drive. It stood on a lower knoll towards the north end of the Ffridd, opposite the first hairpin bend in the drive. The pond, which is roughly circular and has a small island, lies at the south end of the Ffridd, on lower ground below the rocky ridge. The pond area was originally planted with Scots pines, beech and oak but these were felled during the Second World War. The south boundary of Coed Llynlloedd, which is followed by the drive, is marked by a row of deciduous trees, including beech. At the north end of the Ffridd, where the ground drops steeply down to Lodge Field, is a row of oak trees running north-west/south-east, which probably represent an old field boundary.

The main water feature within the park is a string of ponds on a watercourse running northwards through Coed Llynlloedd and the western end of the park. Water was also fed into this system by a very long leat running north-westwards from high ground to the north of Llyn Glanmerin. The ponds lie to the north of the drive up to the Ffridd. At the top, just below the drive, two large trees - a beech and a sycamore - stand on top of a low stone wall, their roots now entwined with it. This may have been related to control of the stream. Below is a roughly triangular pond, with a grass path along its east side and another, smaller stream entering from the east. Across its north end is a substantial earthen dam, with a path across the top, revetted on its outer side by a high, dry-stone wall. This is battered and stepped down the slope. Towards the bottom of the wall is an overflower culvert. The pond remains as a boggy, overgrown area. Below this pond, on the edge of the wood, is a much smaller former pond, now no longer holding water. It has a gently curving earthen dam, about 1.4 m high on its inner side, less on its outer. The stream runs out through a gap at its east end. The third pond lies in the parkland below, in an enclosed area planted with trees. It is roughly oval, its lower side semi-circular and lined with a dry-stone wall. The flat-topped earthen dam has oaks planted on it. There is a central, stone-lined sluice and the stream emerges from a stone-lined culvert at the foot of the dam. On the east side of the dam is a separate, small, stone-lined rectangular 'basin' of unknown purpose. Water was fed from here to the fountain in the Plas grounds. A further pond, closer to the house, has gone.

The ice-house lies near the park boundary, to the south-east of the house. It lies next to the drive to the Ffridd and was excavated and recorded in 1986. The below-ground half of the ice-house survives, with an outer rubble stone skin and a brick lining. Within living memory the ice-house was used to hang meat in. Hounds were once buried behind the ice-house.

The early history of the park area is unclear but, in the context of the house and town, it may date, as cleared ground, from the medieval period. The earliest known record of the park occurs on a map of 1828 by G.T. Whitfield of the Machynlleth Estates which shows an open park area immediately to the south of the house and Coed Llynlloedd in the possession of Colonel Edwards. At this time Llynlloedd Farm was owned by Averina Herbert, heiress to her father Thomas Owen. Land for the park was acquired gradually and piecemeal from the 1790s to 1850. Through a land swop in 1831 with his step-daughter, Harriet Averina Brunetta Herbert, who was Averina Herbert's grand-daughter and a considerable heiress, John Edwards acquired much property in Machynlleth, including the historic manor house of Llynlloedd, which became the home farm and residence of Sir John's agent. In 1840 Edwards made another major breakthrough by buying Lledfair Hall, which lay to the north-east of Plas Machynlleth on a site which included the present kitchen garden. Lledfair Hall was the home of the Revd John James, founder of the Cambrian Archaeological Association in the early nineteenth century. A small monument in the car park marks the site of the house. Sir John demolished the house and moved the road, thus creating the present boundary. The last landscape change, soon afterwards, was another land swop to the west of the kitchen garden, so that the south part was included, with a drive to the road. The north boundary of the park is of the same date.

From about 1840 Sir John Edwards set about creating a grand and beautiful landscape park, to provide a fine setting for his mansion and grounds. Most of the landscaping work, including planting, dates from this period. A tithe map of 1845 shows the area of the park at its maximum extent and there was little change to it after that date. Although some planting and the summerhouse have gone much of the park and its backdrop of woodland remain. In 1931 the farm and park were sold at auction and became separated from the Plas. Before the Second World War Coed Llynlloedd was partially felled and replanted with conifers, to provide work for unemployed miners from north-east England.

Since being given to the town, several peripheral parts of the northern and eastern sides of the

park have been developed. To the east of the garden an area of about acres has been enclosed to make a rugby pitch and football field. This area is surrounded by a beech hedge, larch-lap fencing and stock fence. In the north of the park, just to the north-west of the Llynlloedd farm gates, a new housing development has been constructed on about 1 acre of ground. Before the housing there was a Methodist chapel here and then an aircraft factory. A hospital has been built on the northern edge of the park, further east and a larger area at the east end of the park, on Forge Road, has been developed as an industrial estate.

The gardens of Plas Machynlleth were about four acres in extent and surrounded the house on the north-east, the east and the south, with a further woodland in the south-west. The gardens remain in form but much has been lost to development or redesign. The formal entrances lie in the west and the far north-east. In the west the drive enters the site off the A 487 about 70m beyond the service entrance to the stables. The entrance is set back behind the main boundary wall which runs along the entire north-western side of the site, to the north of an ornamental cruciform lodge, now called Deildy. At the lodge a screen wall connects to a pair of elaborate nineteenth-century iron gates. The drive proceeds straight to the east for about 100m. On the south it is separated from the park by a tree-planted grass bank topped with a nineteenth-century iron fence. On the north, between the drive and the wall, there is a shrubby sycamore woodland which gradually becomes wider as the drive approaches the house. After about 100m the drive terminates, its line continuing as a raised grass earthwork around the southern part of a formal garden on the south of the house which extends as a semi-circle into the park.

To the north of the drive at this point there is a large new visitor car park which covers about one acre cut out of the woodland. A paved path runs from the car park north-east towards the house. The path runs through a small area of tree-planted lawn which contains a few notable conifers. On the south side of the stable lane wall there is a small staff car park. At the southwest corner of the south range the path heads due east, continuing for about 20m around to the east front. Between the north of the path and the house there is a rectangular lawn. This piece of grass denotes the position and size of a previous conservatory. The grass continues to the east where it opens out into a small circular area on the south of the dining room. To the south of the path is a shield shaped area which is split into two parts. On the east, opposite the dining room, there is a new sand covered children's play area. On the west is a small sunken rose garden which is surrounded by wire mesh fence, planted with climbers, on the west and east.

The rose garden is cruciform in design and has a fountain at its centre. Steps lead up out of the rose garden on the south between two Lawson cypresses. A short paved path leads between the trees to the south to a pedestal set with a bust of Mary Cornelia, Sir John Edwards's daughter. Behind the bust there is a bank of rhododendrons which separates the rose garden from the line of the old drive beyond. On the east front of the house the portico opens on to a wide paved area which is separated from the east lawn by a narrow strip of gravel. On the east side of the east lawn the garden boundary is marked by large clumps of rhododendron. The lawn and rhododendrons, continue to the south, to the east of the play area.

North-east of the house a new drive and two car parks have been installed to cater for both

Celtica and the Leisure Centre. The Leisure Centre, a large, low building lies about 60m to the north-east of the house, overlapping the western end of what was Plas Drive. When this was built a number of large beech trees were felled and found to have been planted on rubble, probably the remains of Lledfair House. A path leads from the east of the Leisure Centre, curving round to the north-east to the town. This is Plas Drive and it was the second formal drive to the Victorian house. On the east of the drive there is a strip of grass, about 3m wide, which separates the drive from the park. The garden/park boundary is denoted by a nineteenth-century iron park fence. On the west there is a similar strip of grass which merges into scrubby woodland. This contains a few exotics and it screens the drive from a large car park beyond. In the wood, about 15m to the east of the Leisure Centre, is a small modern nursery school. About 60m down the drive is a small lodge, Norbury Lodge, on the west side. The drive continues for about another 10m beyond Norbury Lodge before it enters an small older area of woodland on both sides of the drive. This planting contains several mature, and very tall, beech. The wood continues for about 10m before it meets a pair of high stone capped walls which enclose the drive for a final 15m. A strip of grass planted with mature prunus runs along the drive on each side. At the end of the drive there is a magnificent set of nineteenth-century iron gates set in an elaborate formal gateway. The gateway connects to a pair of equally elaborate gatehouses which are set back off Maengwyn Street by about 3m.

The gardens date from the early nineteenth century, during the tenure of Sir John Edwards and particularly from 1840 to 1850. Land swopping with Harriet Herbert in 1831, the purchase of more property from her in 1845 and the purchase of Lledfair Hall in 1840, all enabled Sir John to rationalise the grounds through demolition. During this time the Pentrerhedyn road was relocated from the north front of the house to the north-west and hidden behind a stone wall. No illustrations of the gardens at this period are known to survive but a tithe map of 1845 records the formal drives, the stable entrance and service drive which ran to the north of the house to connect with the Plas Drive. The gardens were described simply as 'gardens' and 'shrubbery'. By 1886 the formal garden to the south of the house was recorded and the conservatory had been erected. The woods to the west of the house and to the east of the walled kitchen garden, along the north of Plas Drive had also been established. In the 1880s another fountain stood by the west drive in an area that is now a car park. In 1896 the Prince and Princess of Wales each planted a deodar cedar (Cedrus deodara) near the kitchen garden and four further trees were planted by the royal family in 1911. The last of these, a thujopsis, came down in January 1998. It is understood that the gardens remained much the same up to and after the granting of the site to the town as a public park in 1948. In the 1950s, however, the conservatory was dismantled. Since the 1950s the grounds have become gradually simpler in terms of planting and since 1960 the new buildings, the community centre, clubhouse and, most recently Leisure Centre have been erected.

The site of the walled kitchen garden lies about 70 m north-east of the house. The garden was in two parts, a larger southern vegetable garden, which covered about 1 acre, and a smaller northern orchard. Both of the garden areas were rectangular in shape and were separated by a central wall. The only record of the gardens appears on the 1888 and 1903 Ordnance Survey maps. Both gardens are recorded as having internal path systems and in the southern garden an extensive glass range ran along the south face of the dividing wall. In the central eastern area of the garden there was also a free-standing glass house or glass covered pit. A narrow

belt of trees separated the gardens from the Plas Drive and from the east front of the house. A small lane connected Pentrerhedyn road to the gardens running to the south of the old Smithy. All that remains of the gardens today is the central wall and part of the west, east and south walls. All are constructed of a mixture of stone, brick and moulded stone tile and are of different heights, mainly between 2-3m. Two doorways near the west and east ends of the central wall have been bricked up. The lane to the garden now provides access and parking for a garage whose corrugated iron workshop abuts the remaining west wall. There is no longer any access into the garden in this area. Within the walls a narrow strip of ground is still cultivated as allotments. The allotments extend over an area about 15m wide and are fenced in along the south by a high wire mesh security fence. To the south of the allotments no sign of the garden remains as the Leisure Centre and its car park have been erected over it. The orchard area, which would have been overlooked by houses on the Pentrerhedyn and Maengwyn roads has been totally obliterated. Council flats for pensioners have been erected on its site.

The kitchen garden is believed to date from about 1830/40, when it was probably built either on open land or on the site of previous houses. No illustrations or photographs of the interior of the garden or orchard are known to have survived apart from a photograph of a pair of art nouveau gates which were erected in about 1900 and which have now gone. There were two sets, one on the east and one on the west side of the garden. The design for these was suggested by a visitor, Prince Francis of Teck. The girls' school helped maintain the kitchen garden during the Second World War. After that it probably fell into a gradual decline but it is unclear when the glasshouses were removed. The area passed into the hands of the council and by the 1980s the orchard had been developed as flats. The kitchen garden contained allotments, a hard tennis court and a rugby clubhouse until the late 1980s when the southern area was demolished and a new Leisure Centre built. Prior to the building of the centre an archaeological investigation of the area was undertaken and the remains of the ground floor of Lledfair Hall were recovered suggesting that the later kitchen garden had been partly erected on the garden of the old Hall.

Sources

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