

BODRHYDDAN

Ref No PGW (C) 54

OS Map 116

Grid Ref SJ 046 788

Former County Clwyd

Unitary Authority DenbighshireC

Community Council Rhuddlan

Designations Listed building: Bodrhyddan Hall Grade II*

Site Evaluation Grade II*

Primary reasons for grading

Survival intact of a fine Victorian formal garden, with parterre designed by W.E. Nesfield.

Type of Site

Landscape park; formal garden of parterre and topiary; informal garden.

Main Phases of Construction

c. late sixteenth - early seventeenth century; late seventeenth century; eighteenth century; 1874-75.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Bodrhyddan is an ancient mansion, home of the Conwy family since at least the early fifteenth century, which has undergone many phases of alteration and enlargement. Its present appearance and orientation are largely the work of W.E. Nesfield in 1874-75. The house is situated on the coastal plain between Rhuddlan and Dyserth, just north of the A5151 road.

Of the medieval house, probably built by Richard Conwy in the early fifteenth century, only some extra thick walls remain. This house was given a symmetrical plan, and was encased or rebuilt in brick in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century by John Conwy. Its main front faced south, and the brickwork of the central part of the present south front probably dates from this period. On the north side of the house a wooden door with an elaborate classical stone surround, leading to the cellars, probably dates to this phase. Between 1689 and 1700 Sir John Conwy remodelled the house, giving it some sash windows, and probably replacing a gabled roof with a flat one. This house is shown in drawings by Moses Griffiths of 1784 and 1810. The latter shows that between these dates a single-storey dining room was added on the east side. Further minor alterations took place in the mid nineteenth century.

The major remodelling of the house took place in 1874-75, and was designed by the architect W.E. Nesfield for Captain Conwy Grenville Hercules Rowley-Conwy the grandfather of the present owner, Geoffrey Rowley-Conwy (who inherited the Langford title in 1953). Nesfield moved the main entrance front to the west side, and built symmetrical additions on the west and east fronts in Queen Anne style. These are of red brick, with three storeys and steeply pitched roofs. The central porch on the west is of four storeys topped by a Dutch style gable complete with sundial and heraldic pelican. A copy of the original front door, with the

inscription 'Sr JC BART 1696' was inserted in the east wing. A service court was added on the north-east corner of the house.

To the north of the house is a range of arched garages, built of brick with a central pediment. They were designed by Clough Williams Ellis. The stables and farm buildings lie to the south of the house, next to the A5151 road. The stable yard consists of ranges of stone utilitarian buildings of eighteenth-century date, with an arched gatehouse on the east side. This is topped by a cupola and weather vane and has a clock with chimes. At the north end of the farm entrance drive is a stone monument erected in 1959 from a sketch by Clough Williams Ellis in conjunction with Frank Lloyd Wright, who visited Bodrhyddan together in the late 1950s, and built by the sculptor Jonah Jones. It is a tapering flat stone pillar with gabled top incorporating parts of a monument erected in Rhyl, designed by T.M. Penson, to celebrate the coming of age of Captain Conwy Rowley-Conwy in 1862 (the bowl and blackamoor head). The original inscription on the back records this information.

The park lies to the north, east and west of the house, bounded on the south side by the A5151 road. The western part is more or less flat; the eastern part rises gently towards the east. Until 1874-75 the main entrance to the house was a straight approach, now called The Avenue, and part of the garden, from the south front to the road to the south. In 1874-75 a new drive was made from the new west front of the house westwards to Rhuddlan (c. 1.8 km long). The present drive branches off this, to the A5151 road, and was made in 1928. The long Rhuddlan drive is disused, and cut off by the Rhuddlan golf course which lies at the western end of the estate. The tall stone gate piers topped with the heraldic figures of a saracen or blackamoor's head (Conwy) and a wolf's head (Rowley) at the main entrance on the A5151 were built after a sketch by Clough Williams Ellis in 1963.

The development of the park moved in step with that of the house, and falls into three main areas. First is the gently rising ground to the east of the house, known as the Old Park. This extended northwards as far as a former road to Dyserth, which ran north-eastwards from the house, and east to the present plantations. Two estate maps, of 1730 and 1756, show that it was laid out with three avenues of trees converging on the garden south of the house. The two northern ones are narrow, and join at their western ends; the southern one appears wider. In the south-east corner was a nursery, and between it and the entrance drive were further rows of trees and a belt of woodland. There were two areas of woodland or plantation, one on the east boundary and one at the west end of the Dyserth road, next to the garden boundary. This was the extent of the park, except that the east row of trees along the drive appears to have been continued southwards on the other side of the main road. Possible remnants of this phase are some ancient oaks and limes near the garden. The formality of this planting suggests that it dates to the seventeenth century, but it may be even earlier. It is likely to coincide either with the late sixteenth/early seventeenth-century rebuilding or with the late seventeenth-century remodelling. The two northern avenues lasted well into the nineteenth century, and appear on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, or first part of the nineteenth century the road to Dyserth was removed, its western arm becoming a back drive to the A547 to the north, and the park was extended northwards, reaching the A547 at its north-west end. Field boundaries were removed, although hedge trees were allowed to remain, and two clumps were planted with coniferous and deciduous trees. The western one, with a pond in it, has had cypresses added to it by the present owner. This part of the park is now largely pasture, dotted with many isolated deciduous trees. Probably during the same period a ha-ha was built along the

eastern edge of the garden, giving fine views from the house and garden out over the park.

The area of the park to the east of the house is fenced pasture, with some isolated ancient trees in the southern part (see above). Other isolated trees in this part include a large cedar planted from seed brought back from Egypt in 1836 (a second came down in a recent gale), some sycamores and a row of pines. The eastern boundary of the park is planted with plantations of oak and cherry (1951/52), Danish beech and sycamore (1953), and pines (1890s). To the north-west of these the present owner has planted the Jubilee strip of cypresses, oak, Norway spruce and cherry, along the skyline. The walled kitchen garden, now disused as such, and used for grazing, is situated next to the road in the south-east corner of the park. Just outside its north-west corner is a very well preserved ice-house built into the slope, with the ice cart shed still standing next to it.

The last part of the park to be developed was the area to the west of the house, which was incorporated into the park by Captain Conwy Rowley-Conwy in the 1870s, at the same time as Nesfield was altering the house. This area, known as the New Park, went in conjunction with the making of the new drive to Rhuddlan. This drive is now a farm track as far as Pont-y-Gwnda, on the perimeter of the New Park, beyond which is the golf course. There is still an entrance gateway at the Rhuddlan end, at the A547 roundabout. The area of the New Park was enclosed in a belt of perimeter planting of both coniferous and deciduous trees, which remains. The rest is pasture, with some isolated oaks and a clump of deciduous trees. Pines line the outer part, and young limes the inner part of the present-day drive.

The gardens of Bodrhyddan lie to the south and west of the house. They have been developed over four centuries, and features from all periods remain. They fall into two distinct areas with very different characters: to the south of the house is a formal Victorian garden of topiary and parterre, while to the west is the area known as The Pleasaunce, an informal woodland garden of rough grass, trees and ponds.

The earliest dateable feature in the garden is St Mary's Well, which lies in The Pleasaunce ('The Grove' on maps), to the west of the house. This is an octagonal stone wellhouse with an arched doorway and a lantern topped with a heraldic pelican. To its north is a rectangular cold bath. An inscription on the wellhouse reading 'INIGO JONES 1612' may give the date if not the true architect. It is possible that this is a very ancient sacred spring, and that 'The Grove' was originally planted around it at a very early date. The earliest evidence of a garden layout comes in the estate map of 1730. This shows the boundaries of the garden both to the south and west of the house as they are today, except for the far western end, now part of the outer woodland area, which appears on the map as a field. To the west of the house the garden is shown as a grove, with straight walks cut through it, and with two long narrow ponds, one aligned north-south, and one extending westwards from its southern end. The garden boundary curves out around the northern end of the north-south pond. The 1756 map shows the same layout, with two further ponds: a rectangular one north of the house, and a small semi-circular one outside the north garden boundary, next to the road. It also shows paths leading to St Mary's Well and northwards from it. Apart from boundaries and the general wooded character of this area little remains of this layout except St Mary's Well, and the curving revetment wall at the north end of the garden which is that depicted on the maps at the end of the north-south pond. The mound retained by it, which remains unaltered (with a modern summerhouse on top of it) is probably part of this original layout, forming a focal point at the end of the pond, possibly with a garden building on it. The wall along the east side of the area may also

be pre-1730. The exact date of this layout is difficult to determine. It may date to John Conwy's improvements at the turn of the seventeenth century, and thus be roughly contemporary with the building of St Mary's Well, or it may date to the late seventeenth century rebuilding phase of Sir John Conwy. The character of the ponds and walling suggests the earlier date, with the straight walks being cut through the wood at the later date. All the ponds and walks had gone by the time of the first edition Ordnance Survey map.

The present day appearance of this area owes its character to later alterations: in the 1860s a Japanese feature, a 'Walk of Life', was made, starting at the Well (birth), with a straight cobbled path leading north to a sundial (marriage) and then to a bell (death) near the north end of the garden. The path is now grassed over, but still visible. The sundial remains: it is a small stone pillar with ' I H/K/1637' inscribed on it. The bell has been stolen and replaced with the estate fire bell. The trees are well spaced, the oldest being sycamores, with later planting of monkey puzzles, firs and redwoods (1952). Recent alterations by Geoffrey Rowley-Conwy, the present owner include the making of four informal ponds, the raising of the mound at the north end, tree and shrub planting, and the clearing of an area of bamboos to the north of the house (the site of a former pond).

The south side of 'The Pleasaunce' is bounded by the main drive, made in 1874-75, which leads to a forecourt in front of the west side of the house. A side drive leads off it to the service area to the north. The drive is flanked by grass strips and screening planting of trees and shrubs, with yews predominant. The garden entrance is flanked by short brick piers topped with a wolf on one side and a horse on the other, by Simon Winter, erected in 1985. The piers are flanked by simple iron gates. Formerly this area was part of the woodland garden.

The main Victorian garden lies to the south of the house, but this area too retains the general configuration and boundaries of the earlier layout. The 1730 and 1756 estate maps show the axial approach to the house from the road, leading to a turning circle and cross path in front of the house. The approach is flanked by rows of trees, with a grove between it and the farm buildings to the west. The 1756 map clearly shows a row of trees along the west boundary of this area. The layout in this area is probably part of the alterations of about 1696. The approach is now incorporated into the garden as a grass walk flanked on the west and part of the east sides by rows of trees, mainly yews. At the south end are a pair of stone gate piers topped by heraldic blackamoor busts, which probably date to the 1696 phase. The vista is now closed by iron railings.

The next development in this area was the building of a ha-ha along the complete length of the east boundary of the garden, giving fine views out over the park. This probably took place in the second half of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth century. It remains in good repair, and is crossed by two small bridges. The southern one had iron gates installed at either end in 1981, to commemorate the visit of Princess Margaret.

To the south-east and south-west of the house the garden is laid out to lawns, the eastern end on two shallow terraces. The gravel cross path south of the house may be on the line of that shown on the 1730 and 1756 estate maps. In the 1830s it was planted with flanking yew topiary. This survives as large tapering bushes, some joined by arches overhead. The eastern terraces are bounded by clipped yew bushes of the same period.

In 1874-75, when the house was re-orientated, the drive and turning circle in front of the house were removed and replaced by a formal

parterre designed by W.E. Nesfield. This survives in excellent condition. It is rectangular, set in gravel, with scrolling box-edged narrow beds (filled with bedding plants). In the centre is a circular, stone-edged pool with a central stone fountain of two basins on baluster-type bases. To the north, also on the central axis, is a shallow stone bowl held up by three plasterwork pelicans. At the south end are stone steps flanked by clipped yew bushes probably contemporary with the parterre.

In the north-west corner of this area are the stone footings and backing brick wall of a Victorian conservatory of 1875 which stood at the corner of the house. This was of unusual curving shape, with a small projecting central section for the door. It was destroyed in the gales of February 1990.

At the western end of the area is a row of four ancient oaks, in all probability the trees shown in this position on the 1756 map. To their west are three large oaks, and to their west a clump of oaks self-sown on a former tennis court in 1940, when the court could no longer be kept up.

The kitchen garden is situated in the south-east corner of the park, next to the A5151 road, on ground sloping to the south. There used to be a straight path across the Old Park from the bridge over the ha-ha to a doorway in its west wall, but this is now turfed over. The 1730 map shows a nursery or kitchen garden in the north-west quarter of the present garden, and the present outline in existence as field boundaries. The 1756 map shows the same layout, now divided into four quarters. By the time of the first edition Ordnance Survey map the garden has become a fully fledged walled kitchen garden.

The garden is surrounded by brick walls on a stone base, standing to their full height of c. 3 m except on the south side. This has a stone wall of about the same height and outside it a lower stone wall parallel with it. This gives a narrow strip beside the road which appears to have been used as an orchard. The garden is divided by a north-south stone cross wall. Parallel with the north wall is a range of free-standing glasshouses built against a brick wall. These are now derelict. The interior layout of cross and perimeter paths in the two northern sections, shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map, has gone, and the whole is grassed over, with a few remaining fruit trees.

Sources

Primary

1730 estate map, Bangor University Library: Bodrhyddan papers no. 2020.
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Secondary

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