

OAKBANK AND BULKELEY MILL

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 13 (CON)
OS Map	115
Grid Ref	SH 761 716
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Conwy
Community Council	Caerhun
Designations	Listed building: Bulkeley Mill Grade II
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading Association with the well known gardener and writer A. T. Johnson, who developed and laid out the garden in his favoured wild/woodland garden style and used it as the basis for several books. Much of his structure and planting remains.

Type of Site Small riverside woodland garden incorporating both level and very steep areas; informal plantings of interesting trees with herbaceous and bulbous woodland subjects.

Main Phases of Construction 1920s to 1950s.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The garden which once belonged to A. T. Johnson, well known through the books he wrote about it, lies alongside the Afon Roe near Roewen, a short distance to the west of the Conwy valley. Since Johnson's time it has been divided into two main parts, one belonging to Oakbank, the Johnsons' house, and the other to Bulkeley Mill, a converted corn mill a short distance to the north.

Oakbank, the house in which the Johnsons lived, is a split-level house on a very steep site, built between 1889 and 1900 and originally called The Bungalow. It backs onto the road from Roewen to Caerhun, which forms the eastern boundary of the garden, and overlooks the garden from its vantage point at the top of the steepest part. It is whitewashed, with black paintwork, and has dormer windows in the roof. The house has no consistent style but has some half-hearted mock-Tudor mock-timbering on the gable ends. It has been altered at various times, including the installation of modern sliding glass doors which open on to the terrace over the garden.

To the north of Oakbank is Bulkeley Mill, a much older building consisting of a mill with wheel in situ and the mill house attached, but only re-converted to a dwelling relatively recently (by the Johnsons). There has been a corn mill on the site since the mid fifteenth century at least, and a beam with the date 1689 has been re-used in the present eighteenth-century building.

Bulkeley Mill is built of stone, the upper floor being modern, and the mill has now been incorporated into the house. It has been modernised since the Johnsons first re-converted it. Despite this, many original features remain, including the wheel (restored to working order by the Johnsons, and still working) and some of the associated machinery.

At Oakbank there is a timber-built garage on an area of concrete hardstanding, now disused but presumably in use in A. T. Johnson's time. At Bulkeley Mill is a small brick building just west of the mill. It may originally have been a modest stable building, or a small shippon or store. The floor is tiled on top of an older surface. The building is shown on Ordnance Survey maps back to 1889.

The original garden at Oakbank consisted of only the steep bank crowned by the house, with a very narrow strip of flat ground below it bounded by the mill race on the west. In the 1920s A. T. Johnson and his wife were able to purchase the further flat area between the mill race and the river, and on this developed their woodland garden, owing much to the William Robinson school of 'wild gardening'. Later they acquired a small, more open area to the south, and in the 1940s, after the war, Bulkeley Mill and the land around it. This was used partly to extend the woodland garden, and partly to grow roses and other subjects appreciating a sunnier site.

The garden occupies a long, narrow site sandwiched between the minor road from Roewen to Caerhun and the Afon Roe. The river and the road almost meet north of Bulkeley Mill and do meet at a bridge just beyond the southern tip of the garden. The widest, central part of the garden is only about 60 m across, and the eastern strip, nearest the road, consists of the lower part of the steep valley-side. The rest is on flat, riverside meadowland.

The houses are both on the east, road, side, Oakbank clinging to the valley-side where it is at its steepest. The mill, of course, is at the foot of the slope, and its presence is responsible for one of the main features of the garden, the mill race. Oakbank's precarious position gives it a superb view over the garden, the terrace in front of it now being on a level with the tops of several of the trees.

The site is not on the face of it one to appeal to a gardener, especially when it consisted only of the steep bank originally belonging to Oakbank, but A. T. Johnson was local to the area and chose to live where he felt at home. He began his career as a teacher rather than a gardener. The interest in gardening and the writing of gardening books developed with the garden, rather than the garden being selected as the place in which to put Johnson's gardening ideas into practice.

Johnson was clearly influenced by William Robinson's 'wild gardening' style, but went on to make the woodland garden his own. A genuine plantsman, he particularly loved carpeting plants

which needed little care, and planted them in large blocks; when he found something good he wrote about it and passed it on. Several seedlings of different species from the garden, both deliberately and accidentally bred, bear his name. The garden itself is familiar to his admirers through the descriptions in his books, though these unfortunately contain few photographs of the garden, most of the illustrations being devoted to specific plants.

The garden today has inevitably changed since the Johnsons' time, but most of the structure and much of the planting remains. The roses and beds of massed herbaceous plants near the mill have mostly been replaced by lawns, and increased shading in the southern part of the garden has caused some loss of plantings there. However, the paths which criss-cross the steep bank on the east and wander over the flat areas on the west, the various water features and most of the trees have survived.

Oakbank's garden has several different areas. The very steep bank below and to the south of the house, which is terraced and planted mostly with shrubs, but so well served by narrow paths and steps that it is an easily accessible garden area, is the oldest. To the south of this the river comes very close to the road but one further small area is part of the garden, at present just being reclaimed; this was the first sunny area the Johnsons acquired and was used for herbaceous plantings, although now only the trees remain.

At the foot of the bank, to the west, between the mill race and the river, is the main area of woodland garden. Now densely shaded and mostly under grass, the plantings alongside the mill race have been retained, and the most interesting trees in the garden are here.

Bulkeley Mill's garden is more open, and the bank on the east side more overgrown and less accessible, although there is a path all along it. A fish pond fed by the mill race, and further north the race itself, separate this bank from the flat area, which also has trees, and three large beds with shrubs and underplanting. On the west, alongside the river, is a wide flood-defence bank.

North of the mill a cottage has been built on the site of an old barn, and its garden, which is walled and slightly sunken (an effect increased by the raised bank on the river side), is no doubt the area called by Johnson in his books 'the barn garden', which seems to have been used principally for growing roses.

The two families living at Oakbank and Bulkeley Mill are on friendly terms, and have an unlocked gate connecting their two gardens. By this means the effect of the garden being a single entity is to a great extent retained, much to its benefit. The owners also have in their possession copies of A. T. Johnson's books about the garden, slides, plant lists and other useful information.

At the end of Bulkeley Mill's drive, at the extreme north of the site, there is a row of pines along the eastern boundary of the garden, next to the road wall, as far as the point where the mill race crosses the drive. Beyond this the steep bank is planted with rhododendrons, ash and beech trees (some probably self-sown), conifers such as cypress and yew, and other shrubs

including viburnum, camellia, laurel, hebe, cotoneaster, azalea and berberis. Further south on this bank, again very steep, the trees are mostly fairly small towards the top, with natural undergrowth. Below the path there are some larger trees, and rhododendrons predominate among the shrubs. These appear banked up from the lawn beyond the fish pond to the west, which is the best place from which to view them. Some large-leaved Chinese varieties are included, and the rhododendrons continue on to the 'island' between the mill race and overflow channel, north of the fish pond. There is also a very large pollarded oak on this 'island'.

The northernmost part of the bank that lies within Oakbank's garden is inaccessible and thickly clothed with trees and shrubs at present, including some bamboo near the waterfall over the sluice at the south end of Bulkeley Mill's fish pond. South of this, the lower part of it has been cleared and re-terraced and new shrubs and ground cover planted, but retaining a witch hazel which leans out over the mill race. The upper part retains older shrub plantings.

Below the house at Oakbank the almost vertical slope is densely covered with shrubs and ground cover species, including hart's tongue fern, Rose of Sharon (*Hypericum calycinum*) and ivy. Further south there is a smooth-leaved golden variegated holly, with dwarf conifers (grown rather large), heathers and other shrubs nearby, as well as ground cover. Further south again there are dwarf azaleas near the road wall with larger plants lower down. Where the bank rises directly from the riverside path, the vegetation is mostly natural, and some large sycamores overhang the path. The holly hedge along the north-west boundary of the small southern extension of the garden effectively terminates the steep bank as well.

The lawn of Bulkeley Mill is dotted with trees, particularly cypress (including *Cupressus glabra*, *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Gracilis' and *Cupressus lusitanica*), especially where it extends southwards, alongside the river. South of the garage is a clump of rhododendrons, with more cypresses. Dividing the western part of the lawn from the first of the shrub beds is a row of large shrubs, including rhododendrons, azaleas and tree heathers. South of this part of the lawn is a row of large trees alongside the river, mostly cypress, with some large and unkempt shrubs on the landward side. There are a few shrubs on the extreme east edge of the lawn too, near the mill race and fish pond. Other interesting conifers growing in this area include *Cryptomeria japonica*, Umbrella Pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*), Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) and *Pinus parviflora*.

The three large shrub beds contain an assortment of ornamental trees and shrubs, many of them Johnson plantings. They all have the characteristic ground-cover planting beneath, and many spring bulbs. The westernmost contains a magnolia, camellias and large azaleas as well as a rhododendron growing out of a stone mound at the north end. The central bed has a large conifer at the south end and a mixture of large rhododendrons and azaleas with flowering trees. The easternmost contains mostly rhododendrons and azaleas but also has a witch hazel and some large roses and cotoneasters.

Either side of the fence between the two properties is a wide border running east-west across the garden, full of trees and shrubs. The gate linking the two halves of the garden is towards the

west end of this. These borders have the typical covering of ground-hugging plants, and contain various shrubs including some large rhododendrons. There are a few conifers in the northern one and several deciduous trees in the southern, including a weeping silver birch, *Davidia involucrata* and some acers.

At the northern end, the mill race is flanked by rhododendrons. Lower down it passes between more rhododendrons until it enters the fish pond. Beyond this, in Oakbank's part of the garden, it is bounded by the lawn on the west, with some probably naturally-occurring sedge, and by the shrubs on the bank to the east. Near the house the treatment is more formal, and there are edged beds beside it containing wet-loving species, but also some rhododendrons which have now grown rather large.

The northern part of Oakbank's garden is mostly lawn, with island beds containing trees and large shrubs, especially rhododendrons. Further south the trees are more densely planted, and include a huge evergreen nothofagus close to the river, silver birches, a *Liquidambar styraciflua* and some conifers, although most of the trees in this area are deciduous. Amongst the trees are many irregularly-shaped stone-edged beds containing shrubs, particularly rhododendrons and azaleas, but also hydrangeas and others, underplanted with various kinds of shade-tolerant ground cover, such as epimediums. Around the pond are beds with wet-loving plants, and there is some skunk cabbage growing in it. There are also many spring-flowering bulbs.

The southern area contains a magnificent *Magnolia x veitchii* planted by the Johnsons, and some other trees including conifers and a eucryphia. Most of the herbaceous planting has been lost, but some cyclamen have survived. The area is now being reclaimed, and some young fruit trees have been planted. It is bounded on the north-west by a holly hedge and there are some large laurels and camellias at the south end, and some skimmias by the road gate.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mrs M. Seville

Secondary

Johnson, A. T., *A Garden in Wales* (1927)

Johnson, A. T., *A Woodland Garden* (1934)

Johnson, A. T., *The Mill Garden* (1949)

Thomas, G. S., 'A Garden in Wales', *Hortus* no 24 (1992)