

## PLAS MADOC

<b>Ref No</b>	PGW (Gd) 2 (CON)
<b>OS Map</b>	115
<b>Grid Ref</b>	SH 796 633
<b>Former County</b>	Gwynedd
<b>Unitary Authority</b>	Conwy
<b>Community Council</b>	Llanddoged and Maenan/Llanrwst
<b>Designations</b>	Tree preservation orders
<b>Site Evaluation</b>	<b>Grade II</b>

**Primary reasons for grading** Unspoilt parkland on a well chosen site in the sheltered Conwy valley, surviving despite the loss of the house. Good planting and views.

**Type of Site** Landscape park; overgrown remains of garden and kitchen garden.

**Main Phases of Construction** Eighteenth century; nineteenth century.

### SITE DESCRIPTION

Plas Madoc occupies a site on the east side of the Conwy valley just north of Llanrwst, with lovely views westwards over the Afon Conwy towards Snowdonia. The valley side at this point is not smoothly sloping, but undulates, offering a site which is both interesting and intrinsically beautiful, and this certainly must have been one reason for the choice of site.

Records indicate that there has been a house on the site since the fourteenth century. The latest house stood almost central to the park, on a site levelled partly by cutting back into the slope and partly by building out on a terrace. The garden area surrounded it on all sides, giving a more or less concentric arrangement. The last house was built in the nineteenth century and subsequently enlarged three times; when it was sold in 1857, when the present owner's great grandfather Mr Higson, a mining engineer, bought it in 1890 and lastly in 1910-11. In both 1857 and 1890 there were ten bedrooms but the house was enlarged after 1857, as an estate map dated to the late 1850s shows the larger house. Mr Higson completely remodelled and extended the house in 1890-93, under the supervision of Manchester architects. After this work the house had 22 bedrooms. The house was again rebuilt and further enlarged in 1910-11, the interior being lavishly panelled. During the Second World War it was requisitioned and used as a factory, afterwards being sold again two or three times until it was eventually bought by a builder, who

demolished it in 1952. The panelling was installed in Caernarfon Castle. The present owner's family bought back the park in 1952 but were unable to prevent the house being demolished, acquiring the house site and garden in 1957.

A small, hard-surfaced stable-yard a short distance to the north-north-east of the house site is surrounded on three sides by stone buildings with slate roofs, consisting of stables, carriage house, tack room, gun room and sheds. The fourth side, on the east, is closed by a mortared stone wall which reaches eaves height of the single-storey buildings which it adjoins; the opposite range is two-storey. The entrance to the yard is between stone-built gateposts on the north side, with an iron gate. Some of the roofs have been repaired and the buildings are basically in sound condition. Granite setts in the floor and some internal panelling remain despite the current use as agricultural buildings.

The complex looks very much as if it was built as a single unit, but the 1850s estate map shows only one range on the site. Clearly the block as it now is dates from after this time, but it is probable that the core at least of the original building is included. The new arrangement appears on the 25-in. Ordnance Survey map of 1889, but it would be reasonable to assume that the new stable block would be more or less contemporary with the rebuilding of the house, in which case the 1850s map must have been made after the house was enlarged but before the stable block was built.

Although the park was probably originally laid out much earlier, when Plas Madoc was part of the Gwydir estate, and there are some surviving trees which must date at least from the early nineteenth century, there is no information on the layout of the park before the mid nineteenth century. By then it already looked much as it does now, as maps clearly show, and sale particulars of 1857 described the park as 'richly timbered'. In 1890 it was described as 'studded with well-grown shrubs and majestic timber and ornamental trees', and had 'several well-placed and thriving covers'.

Comparison of the 1850s estate map with the 25-in. Ordnance Survey map of 1889 is informative. The 1850s map shows a layout basically similar to today's: simple, and relying for its effect mainly on the natural advantages of the site; but the drive, from the south, off the Llanddaged road, approached the mansion from due south, passed it on the east and terminated at the stables. By 1889 a new stable block had been built, and the drive continued round in a great sweep to the north-west of the house, eventually turning south again and coming out at the main Llanrwst-Conwy road on the west, where a lodge had been built. Two or three small buildings in the park, west and north-west of the house, had been cleared away, and the outlines of the wooded areas had been redesigned in a more pleasing, curvilinear style.

It has been suggested that Edward Milner, the well known landscape designer, may have been involved in work at Plas Madoc, because Col. John Higson, who bought Plas Madoc in 1890, was a friend of Henry Pochin of Bodnant, for whom Milner had worked. The curving outlines of the woodland and shooting coverts are typical of his style, but the work would appear to have been done before 1890, and if it is Milner's work he must have been employed by the previous owner. Milner worked at Bodnant in the 1870s and at Llanfairfechan in the

1860s.

By 1900, as can be seen from the next edition of the 25-in Ordnance Survey map, further changes had been made. The former smithy at Ty Isaf, in the north-western corner of the park, had been cleared away (the remains of this group of buildings can still be seen), and the new drive, originally unfenced, had been fenced, not in a straight line but with curving bays and kinks in places, some of which survive. Very small circular enclosures were probably protecting newly-planted trees, and some of these trees too can still be seen. More shrubberies had been planted, a footpath closed and the garden area extended to include a new ornamental pond north of the house, with a reservoir at the edge of the park above it. A keeper's hut and two small enclosures (now gone) had been built outside the eastern edge of the garden. A new wood had been planted on the site of another small building, near the south-east entrance; this area did not belong to the park when the 1850s estate map was made.

Later descriptions in sale particulars show the same picture. In 1954 the drive was gravelled and tree-lined (it never had an avenue, but trees are planted at intervals along it), and there were already Tree Preservation Orders covering the park. Apart from the further enlargement and subsequent demolition of the house, and some changes within the garden, the park in 1900 was basically as it is now. Col. Higson at one time created a lake in the Back Park, east of the garden, to supply water, but this was unsuccessful and has left no trace except a few pipes. There has been some loss of trees, and recent neglect had allowed the shrubberies to become overgrown and the woodlands to decay somewhat, but these are now being restored. The drive has lost its surface through disuse, and there are few planted young trees. Otherwise, the rolling parkland dotted with trees, both deciduous and coniferous, the views across the Conwy valley towards the mountains, and the clumps of woodland with their rounded outlines crowning outcrops and hillocks must look very much as they did at the turn of the century.

The main drive passes through the park from west to east, in a wide loop round the north side of the house site. It effectively divides the park into three areas, Back Park (east of the drive), Front Park (within the loop) and Far Park (north of the drive). It is now largely unsurfaced, although on the 'new' north and west part of the drive some of the gravel surface survives; the 'old' south-east part has recently been resurfaced with gravel. The fencing either side of the drive north and west of the house is still in place, as are many of the trees planted alongside it. The southern part of the drive on the east was never fenced. This southern part is the original drive, the loop to the north and back to the west having been added between the late 1850s and 1889, and the fencing between 1889 and 1900. This new drive evidently became the main approach, with a lodge at the gate, reflecting perhaps the increasing importance of the Llanrwst-Conwy road.

The lodge is of grey stone with a steeply pitched slate roof, and sandstone quoins and window surrounds. It is single-storey with a central chimney, and has a small verandah-style porch with sandstone pillars. The gateposts are clearly contemporary, being built of the same stone; they are octagonal, with sandstone quoins, and the flanking wall has sandstone coping. The posts have lost their large stone balls, but they are on the ground nearby.

There was never a lodge at the south-east entrance, but it has two sets of gateposts. The inner pair, built of relatively thin stone blocks, with truncated pyramidal caps, and with associated walling of the same stone, with a flat stone coping wider than the wall, are possibly eighteenth century, and are certainly earlier than the outer pair. The latter, about 3 m further out, are larger and built of thicker blocks, looking noticeably less refined than the older set.

The original setting-down area, from the old south-east drive, was on the south side of the house where the drive came up to it, but by 1889 it had been moved to the north, and in particulars of sale of 1954 this is described as a 'spacious forecourt'. These particulars also say that the drive 'terminates' at the forecourt, which suggests that the drive from the south-east, having been moved slightly to the east for the northern part of its route so as to skirt the house on that side, had been demoted to service drive status.

The woods in the park were mostly designed as shooting coverts, and although their shapes have altered slightly and they have grown over the years, the layout of woodland today is basically the same as it was in the 1850s. Trees are mixed deciduous and coniferous. The smaller coverts and copses are mostly located on rocky outcrops or the tops of rises. The main additions have been (by 1889) the triangle near the main entrance on the south-west, with some increase in the proportion of the garden which was wooded, and (by 1900) a general enlargement of most areas on the north and west, as well as a small plantation of firs on a triangular site near the south-east entrance, not originally part of the park. Most of these areas are separated from the grazed parkland by park fencing, and consist of a mixture of conifers and deciduous trees, with evergreen shrubs for cover. Their sinuous shapes may, as has been mentioned, be an indication of the influence, direct or indirect, of Edward Milner.

There is a good survival rate of parkland trees, which show unusual variety. Most are in groups of two or three, though some are individually planted, and the species used include oak, holm oak or ilex (*Quercus ilex*), deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), lime, walnut and sweet chestnut.

The basic layout of the area around the house appears on the estate map of the 1850s, and may pre-date this; the detailed layout of the garden dates from the nineteenth century, when there was also some expansion, and there are twentieth-century additions. Apart from the walled kitchen garden, the area seems to have been always mainly woodland and shrubberies.

The garden lies almost in the centre of the park, surrounding the house site which is almost in the centre of the garden. The site was levelled by cutting into the hillside and by the construction of a terrace, which was extended far enough to give a garden terrace on the west side of the house. Although the main entrance was on the north, this west front would have had the benefit of the views, and was clearly the main front of the house, as can be seen from photographs. There was a verandah all along this side. The kitchen garden lay below the house on the same side, and the rest of the garden area, mostly woods and shrubbery, surrounded the house on the other three sides. After years of neglect that garden has now been taken in hand and cleared of overgrown laurels and self-seeded trees. The basic layout and structure can still be made out. The network of paths is in the process of being cleared.

The area to the west of the house site, surrounding the kitchen garden, has been woodland since the 1850s at least, although an area on the south-west has become wooded more recently, and another area to the south of this, part of the enclosed area in the 1850s, was subsequently opened up to the park, and then fenced off again early in this century. The whole area slopes down to the west, and is crossed by terracing walls to allow for level paths. To the north, the woodland extends to enclose the stable block, which is thus completely screened from the house site. There are several paths leading to and from the stables.

East of the house site the land slopes up quite steeply, and this area, known as the Rookery, has again been wooded since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. There do not seem ever to have been formal paths here, but between 1889 and 1900 some steps were built giving access to the wood from the east side of the drive, and these remain in place.

North of the Rookery, and of the house site, is the part of the garden most recently added. By 1900 an ornamental pond had been created here, dammed by a wall on the west side and with three, presumably grass, terraces on the bank below the wall. New woods and shrubberies had been planted to the north-east, either side of the stream leading down to the pond from the newly-constructed reservoir on the park boundary. All these features remain; the pond has been cleared of trees, dredged and the dam wall relined. It will shortly be back in use.

Between the pond and the Rookery lies the last area to be enclosed as part of the garden. Trees have been planted to the east, and the open area between these and the drive has been landscaped and levelled for a tennis court, recently cleared of trees and reseeded. A right-angle of walling, with an enlarged corner containing what may have been either a spectators' area or a planted feature, defines part of the levelled area and retains the higher ground behind.

The drive runs through the garden from south-south-east to west-north-west, skirting the house site and the stable block, with branches leading to these. East of the house site, the drive runs at a higher level than the house terrace, on its own narrower terrace; here there was once a covered, wet-weather setting-down point.

North of the house site is the main setting-down area, formerly gravelled, reached by a branch curving sharply off the drive. On the east side of it there is a bank up to the level of the drive, and this has been made into a rockery, remaining in good condition, although little planting survives. Other small areas of rockery exist within the shrubberies near the house site.

The stone wall which supports the terrace on the west of the house site remains in fairly good condition, and at the north-west, where the ground drops away most steeply, it is of a considerable height. An interesting feature of this is that a pre-existing mature oak tree has been incorporated in the terrace near the south-west corner: rather than fell it, the terrace was built up around it, so that its branches now spread out unnaturally near the ground. This tree can also be seen on early twentieth-century photographs, and is indicated on the 1889 map.

Despite the neglect the garden has suffered, daffodil bulbs planted over the whole of the garden area south-west of the house have survived, and it is clear that when in flower these

daffodils must carpet the woodland.

The kitchen garden lies below the house on the west, with terraces above and a wooded area below. It is rectangular and walled all round, but the walls are not high enough, at about 1 m average, for wall fruit, or to give much protection, which seems to have been supplied instead by trees. The west wall is 1.5 m high on the outside, as the kitchen garden, although sloping, has been levelled to some extent. The glasshouses and other garden buildings were at the northern end.

The open area of the garden is now well filled with self-sown trees. The internal layout is not quite clear, but has certainly been altered since the 1889 map was made. There was a stone-edged bed along the eastern side, within the wall, and a stone-edged cross-path somewhat nearer the southern end than the northern; the central north-south path was not edged and was apparently constructed after 1889. Other cross-paths still have their barley-sugar edging tiles. Where the two main paths cross there are three metal posts, presumably the remains of a support for climbing plants over the crossing.

The glasshouse is ruined, but the back wall still stands, brick-lined and whitewashed. The base wall at the front is stone. The sheds behind, which were stone-built, are also ruined. These are shown on the 1889 map, but the glasshouse not until 1900. There was a glasshouse and probably a frame in the shrubbery area north of the garden in 1889, however, and the bases of buildings incorporating both brick and stone can still be seen in this area, although they do not seem to conform exactly to the layout shown on the 1889 and both the other maps - there seem to have been at least two frames and possibly two greenhouses as well before they fell out of use. There is also a retaining wall with a concrete top to the east of them, where the ground has been cut away to level the site. The whole of this area is swamped in giant laurels, which seem to be growing in lines and could therefore once have been hedges.

The north wall of the garden has mostly collapsed, but is interesting in that it was completely different from the other walls. It was higher, mortared, and had slate slab coping, and there is a fairly imposing stone-built gate pillar at the eastern end. It may well have survived from an earlier period, being utilised when the kitchen garden was created.

North of this wall is an area the function of which is unclear. It looks like a wide border, filling the gap between the wall and the east-west path behind, down to the end of the sheds on the west side, but has iron supports along the front, as if for wire. It could perhaps have been an aviary, although none is indicated on the maps, or a fruit cage, though it would have been somewhat shaded by the wall.

The kitchen garden seems to have been laid out between the late 1850s and 1889, within a pre-existing garden area. Its layout has changed since 1889, and maps after this date do not show the layout of paths, so it is not clear when alterations were made.

## Sources

## **Primary**

Information from Dr Peter Higson

Estate map of the late 1850s, particulars of sale of 1857, 1890, 1951 and 1954, and photographs supplied by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, together with a letter. Private collection

## **Secondary**

Lloyd, T., *The lost houses of Wales* (1986), p. 32