

## RHEOLA

<b>Ref number</b>	<b>PGW (Gm) 53 (NEP)</b>
<b>OS Map</b>	170
<b>Grid ref</b>	SN 838 042
<b>Former county</b>	West Glamorgan
<b>Unitary authority</b>	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
<b>Community council</b>	Glynneath
<b>Designations</b>	Listed building: Rheola Grade II
<b>Site evaluation</b>	<b>Grade II</b>

**Primary reasons for grading** The survival of an early nineteenth-century villa by John Nash and its contemporary picturesque setting. Although part of the park has been built on by a wartime aluminium plant the majority of the setting, which was kept deliberately simple, survives, as do some of Nash's picturesque estate buildings. The gardens have been enhanced by later nineteenth-century tree and shrub planting.

**Type of site** Small picturesque park; informal grounds; walled kitchen garden

**Main phases of construction** c. 1812-13; 1828-29

### Site description

Rheola is a substantial, two-storey house in a simple Regency style, situated on the north side of the Vale of Neath, 2 km to the north-east of Resolven. The house lies on levelled ground at the southern end of the narrow tributary valley of the Rheola Brook and is orientated north-west/south-east, its main entrance being on the south-west side. The Rheola Brook runs along its north-east side. The white-painted stone house has sash windows, pitched slate roofs, brick chimneys and verandahs along the south-west and south-east sides. The latter, on the garden front, has iron piers, the former, on the entrance front, has rusticated stone piers. The verandah projects forwards slightly in front of the central front door. At its north end is a two-storey octagonal projection (the servants' hall). A similar projection lies at the east end of the garden front (the drawing room) and there is a shallower one near the south end of the north-east front (the library). To the north, the ground floor has round-arched windows and the north end is single-storey, with a tall brick chimney. Extending north-westwards from the main block is a lower, rubble stone service block. This consists of service rooms along the south-west and south-east sides of a rectangular courtyard, walled on the remaining sides. It is entered through a passage in the centre of the south-west side. In the north corner is a small, brick, octagonal game larder. The north end of the house is

built into the slope, which is steep and boggy; water from it is removed by a drain next to the game larder.

Rheola was built in several phases. The estate was bought by John Edwards (1738-1818/19), a successful engineer from Neath, from Capel Hanbury Leigh, of Pontypool Park (Torfaen) in *c.* 1800. Edwards was the architect John Nash's uncle and asked him to enlarge the small farmhouse that already existed on the site, maintaining its 'cottage-like appearance'. This new house, designed by Nash, was built in 1812-13 and had been finished by 1814, when it is recorded in paintings by Thomas Hornor. These show the house much as it is now, but with a single-storey conservatory, now gone, extending south-westwards from the south end of the entrance front. A plan of the estate, dated 1815, by Hornor, shows that the house was slightly smaller than it is now, the three rooms along the north-east front, to the north of the library, not being shown. The walled service courtyard is also not shown, although the range along its south-west side is. Interestingly, the plan, presumably reasonably accurate, shows another, smaller, building to the south-west of the house, where the large forecourt is now. It is possible that this was the original farmhouse. It may already have been coming down or ruined, as it does not appear on Hornor's contemporary paintings and drawings of Rheola.

Nash's collaborator, George Repton (son of the landscape designer Humphry Repton), visited Rheola in 1814 and produced drawings for two farmhouses and a steward's house (now Brynawel). The 'Farm house for Mr Edwards - in Wales' (*c.* 1814) was small and 'cottage-like' but bears only a passing resemblance to Rheola, which is much larger, making it likely that it was intended for elsewhere on the estate and never built. However, Rheola was built as a romantic, overgrown cottage, rather than a mansion, in a natural setting. Hornor described it as 'an attractive feature in a landscape whose prevailing character is repose and seclusion'. At first it was approached not by a drive but by a gated path, the stables being at a distance to the south-east. At the time of building the main road down the Vale of Neath ran much closer to the house, along the lawn to its south.

John Edwards's son, also John Edwards (1772-1833), was a close friend of John Nash, and also became his solicitor, professional collaborator and neighbour in Lower Regent Street, London, where he and Nash owned a pair of luxury mansions. Although he did not own Rheola until 1820, when his mother bequeathed it to him, he lived there before that and probably had a hand in planning its layout. The former stables, kennels and laundry lie to the south-east of the house, at the south end of Rheola Pond, near the A465 road. The stables are a substantial, tall, rubble stone building divided into two sections. The western half has a central court open to the north. Immediately to the north is a small house, Rheola Cottage, that used to be the laundry. To the north of that is a ruined stone building that was the kennels. These buildings all appear on the 1877 Ordnance Survey map and it is assumed that they are contemporary with the building of Rheola in the early nineteenth century.

Along the west side of the forecourt, built against the steep slope which bounds it on this side, are two garages and two small sheds, with a unified stone facade. Over one of the sheds is carved the date 1941.

There is very little parkland at Rheola. This is partly due to the approach to landscaping of Nash and the Edwards family, which was to maintain the simple, rural setting, and partly to the occupation of a large part of the former park to the south of the house by a disused wartime aluminium works.

Most of the remaining park lies to the east of the house, on level or gently sloping ground between the garden and the A465 road. To the south of the house and garden is an area of grass on which part of the aluminium works, demolished in the early 1990s, stood. The drive enters the park to the east of the works. At the entrance, on the A465, is a two-storey lodge of coursed stone blocks, tiled roofs with rounded ridge tiles and a brick chimney. It has a bow window on the west side and a porch on the south. The drive here has been subsumed into access for the factory, the present-day start of the drive being further to the north-west. Just inside this simple entrance there are two mature trees, a copper beech and a sycamore, next to the drive. The tarmac drive then runs north-westwards past the works, curving round to run south-westwards along and below the boundary of the garden in front of the house. Before reaching the garden a branch runs eastwards to Rheola Cottage and the pond. At the eastern corner of the garden a branch runs north-westwards to a simple iron gate and then on, flanked by four cypress trees, along the Rheola Brook, past the east side of the house and into the gardens. The main drive turns sharply to the north at the south-west corner of the garden and runs to a large forecourt west of the house. At the corner a track continues westwards past the kitchen garden, to its north, and into deciduous woodland. After *c.* 300 m it reaches a small cottage, Keeper's Cottage, and then emerges on a lane.

The park to the east of the house consists mainly of a gently sloping lawn leading down to a large pond, Rheola Pond. On the west and south side the area is bounded by the drives and by the Rheola Brook, which is confined to a deeply cut, stone-lined, artificial channel. Opposite the house this is crossed by a utilitarian iron bridge. The floor of the channel is partly natural, partly stone built, and in places there are shallow cascades. On the east are the former stables, Rheola Cottage (former laundry) and the A465 road. To the north the whole area is backed by the wooded flank of the Vale. The lower part of the wood is deciduous and includes rhododendrons; above are commercial conifer plantations. Rheola Pond, which has been recently dredged, has a central island and a curving edge on all but the road side. A track runs around it and another runs westwards to the drive near the house. A stream follows the foot of the slope west of the pond, reaching the pond in its north-east corner. Just above this, to the west of the pond, is an ice-house, built into the steep slope. It is a circular stone building, with a domed roof covered in stone tiles. On the west side is an entrance tunnel leading to the egg-shaped, brick-lined chamber. The tunnel has a gently arched roof. Above the ice-house is a gently sloping track running along the slope. This is a disused industrial trackway, a survival from the days when this hillside was mined for coal.

In the wood on the east flank of the Rheola Brook valley, to the north-east of the house, is a small ruined building, the so-called Bachelor's Hall, of which the stubs of the walls and one gable end remain. The building stands in a glade on levelled ground, backed by rhododendrons, facing south-west across the valley. It was built of rubble stone, with squared corners and moulded brick dressings. The roof was stone tiled. The building had a central room, with a fireplace and projecting semi-octagonal bay, flanked by side rooms. The ground in front and inside is paved with stone.

There was no landscaping on this site before Rheola was built in *c.* 1812-13. Initially the public road ran across the front of the house, on the garden boundary, its line continuing west along the present track to Keeper's Cottage and eastwards over the Rheola Brook, where there was a bridge and ford. Hornor's illustrations and estate map of Rheola, of 1814 and 1815, show a simple setting: the house has a narrow lawn

in front, then a field bounded by wooden fencing and a hedge. Behind the house, to the north, are woods and then open moorland.

The park was created by the removal of the public road *c.* 300 m to the south, to run next to the Neath canal. This was done in 1828-29 by John Edwards, after he inherited the property in 1820. As a close associate of John Nash he was probably influenced by him in his landscaping ideas. Nash also designed some picturesque buildings in the park and grounds. These served to enhance the picturesque qualities of the landscape and setting of the house. In conjunction with the removal of the road a new drive, the present one, was made. Rheola Lodge, which was not built in 1815, was in existence by 1877 (Ordnance Survey map) and was probably created soon after the road was moved. It is thought that it might have been converted from an existing farmhouse or cottage, possibly the one in George Repton's Pavilion Notebook, designed by Nash as a 'Farm house for Mr Edwards', to which it has considerable similarities. If this is the case, then it was turned around to face south when converted to a lodge. Much of the park to the south of the house, created by the removal of the road is now taken up by the aluminium works. The lake to the east was created in *c.* 1840.

As well as the house and the lodge there were two further buildings at Rheola that were designed by Nash. The first, no longer within the property, was the steward's house, now called Brynawel. A drawing of this appears in George Repton's Pavilion Notebook, dated 'Novr. 1818', that is, shortly before John Edwards senior died. This stands on an elevated spot to the north of Rheola Pond and would originally have been a picturesque object viewed from the house. The two are no longer intervisible. The last Nash building is the so-called Bachelor's Hall, originally reached by an 'alpine' bridge across the stream, just to its south. Of this there is no trace. Bachelor's Hall was another picturesque object in the landscape, to be viewed from the house and garden. It is thought to have been built for visitors, but was latterly used by the gardeners. It is depicted in a watercolour by Thomas Hornor of 1817. This shows a rustic, picturesque cottage standing in a clearing in the wood, with an 'alpine' bridge over the stream in the foreground. Hornor described the building as 'delightfully secluded in the Cwm or Dingle a short distance from the house and containing a few snug rooms which render it much too good for an anchorite; and indeed rather more comfortable than most bachelors deserve'. The attribution of this building to Nash is through its close resemblance to a drawing, in George Repton's manner, of a building at Nanteos, Ceredigion. George Repton visited Rheola from Nanteos in 1814.

The garden consists largely of informal grounds to the north and west of the house. There is a small area of formal garden, consisting of brick-edged beds and a paved area to the immediate west, on the site of the conservatory. To the south of the house a former drive, now no longer used as such, sweeps round from the east and runs below the verandah. Below this is a slope to a level lawn, with central brick and concrete steps down to it in the centre. The lawn is bounded on the east and west by low scarps and on the south by a scarp down to the drive, which runs along it. On this edge there are some pines, a yew and a dog's gravestone ('Peter faithful friend 1892-1907').

To the west the drive runs northwards to the forecourt, flanked by a raised bank of mature trees and shrubs, including beech, lime, yew and rhododendron, on the east and on the west by a steep bank planted with similar trees, in front of the east wall of the kitchen garden.

To the east of the house is a narrow strip of ground between house and stream, with a large cedar tree at its south end. A stony drive runs past the east front up the valley into an area of informal lawn planted with mixed trees and shrubs and backed by hanging woods. The trees and shrubs, some of which have grown to enormous size, include pines, cypresses, monkey puzzles, rhododendrons and azaleas. At the head of the grounds is a particularly large rhododendron. The track winds westwards up the steep slope, past two large wellingtonias planted on mounds, oaks and a smaller monkey puzzle tree than that below, and then doubles back at a higher level to descend the slope gradually, eventually arriving back at the south end of the grounds near the forecourt. The track is backed by mixed woodland, including some conifers. The area of woodland flanking the west side of the gardens was originally a large, square, tree nursery. Now completely overgrown, it contains many rhododendrons and pines planted close together. There are the remains of iron fencing around the area.

At the upper end of the grounds the stream is more natural than below, but it is still in a deep channel, parts of which are revetted with stone and concrete. There was originally a track along the stream; it is still visible but mostly grassed over. Two large yew trees stand next to it. At the head of the grounds, next to the stream, is a concrete-lined, rectangular water tank, with the remains of stone and brick walling around it. At the south end is a flight of steps down into the water. To the south of the tank are the remains of a small room, with higher walls. The tank appears originally to have been for water supply but was later converted into a swimming pool. To the north the valley narrows and is densely wooded, mainly with oak, ash and birch. On the fringes of the woodland are banks of rhododendrons.

The gardens were developed during the nineteenth century, in association with the building of the house. Before that time it is unlikely that there were any ornamental grounds. By 1815 (Hornor's estate map) the new house had been built and the layout of the garden immediately around the house which still exists today had been created. The setting was supposed to be as natural as possible and the layout was kept simple. The map shows a narrow terrace on the south front, then a lawn down to the public road. The approach, as now, was along a track or drive to the west of the house. There was also a path closer to the house, which led more directly to the forecourt opposite the front door. The former ran to the north of what was probably the old farmhouse, the latter to its south. The public road, fringed with trees, ran across the end of the lawn. Behind the house was an irregular lawn more or less surrounded by trees. The tank was in existence, as was the path, which still exists, winding up the slope. The steep bank between the drive and the kitchen garden (already there) was wooded, suggesting that some of the mature trees here may date from this period or earlier. A drawing of the house and its setting by Hornor, dated 1814, shows the general layout, with well wooded slopes behind the house. Another, of *c.* 1820, shows the 'cottage' and the south lawn, with some island beds at the west end and a curving shrub bed to the west of the conservatory. The 'Bachelors' Hall' had been built by 1817 and a path led to it through the garden behind the house and over a rustic bridge across the stream.

Removal of the road further away in 1828-29 left the garden layout unaltered, although what had been a road across the end of the south lawn became the drive. The 1877 Ordnance Survey map shows that by this time the lawn behind the house had been dotted with ornamental trees, both deciduous and coniferous, and shrubs, and more paths had been introduced. The large, mature conifers and rhododendrons in this area today had probably been planted by this time. To the south of the house the

straight path to the forecourt has gone but the rest remains the same and is much as it is now, except that the conservatory has gone and modern terrace walling and steps have been introduced.

The kitchen garden lies to the south-west of the house, on ground sloping to the south. To its east is a steep wooded bank down to the drive and to its south is a track, formerly the public road, leading to the Keeper's cottage. The garden is divided east-west into two four-sided, walled compartments, the northern one being the larger.

The upper, northern compartment is wider at the top than the bottom. Its walls are now discontinuous. The north wall is of brick, *c.* 2.5 m high, and its west end is missing. At its east end is a large opening. A well built rubble stone wall, *c.* 2 m high, with brick coping, runs down the east side. Next to it, near the south end, is a small ruined glasshouse. The west wall of the compartment is also missing. In the north-west corner is a large, oval pool. To its south is a track which runs westwards beyond the garden.

The lower compartment is more rectangular, elongated east-west. Its walls are of rubble stone, with uneven tops, and stand up to 3 m high. Along the east side the wall is higher on the outside because of the steep slope. Here it survives complete, with stone coping. There is a door in the north wall through into the upper compartment. To its east there are traces of whitewashing on the wall, indicating a former lean-to glasshouse. To the south of this are the ruined walls and chimney of a large, oblong, freestanding glasshouse. To its south-east is a circular, stone-lined well. In the north-west corner is an L-shaped small building of stone with brick facings. On its inner side, facing the garden, there are two gothic windows. The compartment is bounded on the south by a rubble stone revetment wall, *c.* 1.5 m high, with a holly hedge on top of it.

The kitchen garden is shown in its present form on Hornor's estate map of 1815, indicating that it was probably built at the same time as the house, in 1812-13. The upper compartment is shown with its pond and two paths. The lower compartment has its central well, a lean-to glasshouse and building (rectangular, not L-shaped). The layout is simple, with perimeter paths and a north-south central path. The nursery to the north is not in existence at this stage. By 1877 a grid of paths and three small glasshouses, in the south-east corner, have been added to the upper compartment. In the lower compartment the building is now L-shaped and the free-standing glasshouse has been added. The nursery to the north is also now in existence.

## Sources

### Primary

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### Secondary

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