

ABERGLASNEY

Ref number PGW (Dy) 5 (CAM)

OS map 159

Grid ref SN 5815 2213

Former county Dyfed

Unitary authority Carmarthenshire

Community council Llangathen

Designations Listed buildings: Aberglasney (grade II*); north-east courtyard range plus former stables and cartshed (grade II); south-east courtyard range plus former bakehouse and cowsheds (grade II); former small coach house and bailiff's house (grade II); gatehouse (grade II); former domestic outbuildings to NW of walled garden (grade II); arcaded terrace walks enclosing walled garden (grade II*)

Tree Preservation Orders covering most of the mature trees within the curtilage. Conservation Area.

Site evaluation Grade II*

Primary reasons for grading The survival of the structure and some trees of formal gardens and an informal woodland garden of a long established country mansion. The most important feature is an arcaded court with raised walk around it, probably dating to the early seventeenth century. There are also two walled gardens, a pond, a gatehouse, a yew tunnel walk, and remains of woodland walks. Most information about the site's history has come from archaeological excavation, which has revealed a major phase of building work on the gardens in the early seventeenth century. Aberglasney has undergone a major programme of rebuilding and restoration work in the late 1990s.

Type of site Pleasure grounds, formal gardens, woodland garden and associated features surrounding the house.

Main phases of construction Arcaded court and terrace walk, probably early seventeenth century; gatehouse, sixteenth or seventeenth century; other features extant 1840, although possibly earlier.

Site description

Aberglasney is situated to the west of the small village of Llangathen, some 5.5 km (3.5 miles) west of Llandeilo. It nestles in the lee of Grongar hill, which is to the west, at about 40 m above AOD. This once fine house may have medieval origins but externally it appears as a three-storey, eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century block. Until the late twentieth century the remnants of the once fine portico lay at the foot of the north front of the house. This was a large Ionic structure, possibly dating from 1846 and designed

by Edward Haycock, the architect from Shrewsbury. It was returned to the site and rebuilt in the centre of the north front as part of the restoration of the late 1990s.

The site has an ancient and mixed history. Jones notes that it was a well known residence from about 1350 onwards, the first recorded occupants being the Thomas family, who were apparently descended from Elystan Glodrudd, who came to the county by the marriage of Sir Gruffydd ab Elidyr to a daughter of Rhys Gryg, a prince of Dynevor. By the Tudor period, the family had assumed the name Thomas and Sir William Thomas became the first High Sheriff of the new shire of Carmarthen in 1541 - 42; both his son and grandson also became High Sheriffs. In about 1600 the estate was sold to the Bishop of St Davids, Anthony Rudd. He pulled down the old mansion on the site and had built an imposing residence that was assessed as having thirty hearths (and a private chapel) in 1670.

In 1710, the property was sold to a lawyer from Kidwelly, Robert Dyer. His son John became a parson and, more famously, a poet, the author of *Grongar Hill* (1726). The Dyer family was greatly impoverished by the end of the eighteenth century and sold Aberglasney in 1803 to Thomas Phillips, who had made a fortune in India. He renovated and improved the property, although retaining many parts of Bishop Rudd's fabric. His nephew inherited the property and it remained in the family until the death of his granddaughter, Mrs Mayhew, in 1939. Since that time, there have been a number of owners. The last, Mrs Margaret Perry, intended to renovate the property, but these plans were never fulfilled. During her tenure the pillars from the portico were removed.

To the west of the house and garden is a group of outbuildings that were for various domestic and utilitarian uses.

The stables and cart shed form a substantial building at right-angles to the lodge, to which it is linked by an arch of dressed stone possibly of medieval origin. The style of this building is nineteenth-century. However, there are breaks in the front that might suggest that it is not all of one build. The roof, which is hipped, has recently received attention and is slate-covered; at the south end there are dove boxes. There were originally two openings for the carts, but one is now blocked. There is a lean-to at the rear of the building, without a roof in the mid-1990s.

The lodge is attached to the stables and cart shed by a dressed stone arch. It is now whitewashed but is apparently of rubble construction with a hipped roof that extends some distance beyond the east gable end. Also on this east gable is a porch or veranda with a slate roof and metal supporting columns. Above the veranda roof is a curious circular window.

The bakehouse and cowshed range is a long, single storey, rubble stone building with a hipped slate roof, probably nineteenth-century. There is a chimney stack for the bakehouse at one end of the building and it is attached to the coach house at the other.

The former bailiff's house and small coach house are probably mid-nineteenth-century in date. They have slate roofs and modern brick chimney stacks. The semi-circular arched carriage entries have been blocked, but are still visible in the break in the masonry. The bailiff's house has mostly modern windows; however, on the lane side there is a late medieval freestone window with four-centre head and leaded glazing. This is said to have been removed from the Bishop's Palace at Nantgaredig, although Abergwili may have been meant. Inside the bailiff's house is said to be a plaster ornamented fireplace removed from Aberglasney House.

The building to the north-west of the arcaded court can be reached by an arched opening at the west end of the court's north wall. The ground level within the walled garden is considerably higher than the floor level of these buildings and there are steps

between the two. Probably built in the early nineteenth century as three cottages, the building stands to two storeys and is rubble-built with a tall hipped roof. At some stage in the recent past, the slates have been removed and plastic roofing felt secured. On the north-east side, the door and window openings are mostly pointed, whilst on the south-west side the openings are camber or square-headed. There is a blocked opening in the north-west end. The building is now used as a cafeteria and exhibition area.

The house and grounds occupy an area of gently south-west facing land on the northern side of the Towy Valley. In 1840 the tithe map showed that the Aberglasney estate consisted of some 133 acres, the house and gardens occupying about 12 acres. The arcaded court, three walled gardens, gatehouse and pond were extant at that time. The configuration of these features had changed little in 1887; the two eastern walled gardens had been amalgamated and a northern dividing wall had been erected to create the western walled garden. Both these gardens had internal perimeter paths and were divided by two intersecting paths. There was also a complex series of intersecting paths in the arcaded court west of the house. The path leading southwards to the Pigeon House appears to have been abandoned between 1840 and 1887. The formal pond to the west of the house, below the arcaded court, appears on both maps in very much the same format, although more regular in shape on the First Edition Ordnance Survey of 1887.

The Tithe Survey of 1840 and early editions of the Ordnance Survey maps indicate that there were two principal entrances to the property. First, there was a short drive from the minor road to the village of Llangathen, to the north-east of the garden, originally entering the grounds through a pair of fine iron gates hung on stone gate piers. The gates disappeared in the early 1990s. They were flanked by large and impressive piers, that stood to about 2.5m, which in turn were flanked by two arched pedestrian entrances. The stone for this entrance had been carefully dressed; each pier stands on a small plinth and the stone has been recessed at the joint of each course. As part of the restoration programme of the late 1990s these piers and arched entrances have been restored and their tops rebuilt. From this entrance the drive curved gently towards the house. Now, only a short stretch remains before the modern visitor facilities of the entrance gatehouse, drive and car park intervene. Immediately to the east of the house there was a short spur to give access to the side and south of the house.

The other carriage drive was across the fields, running in a north-westerly direction to join the (now) A40 a little to the east of the drive to Lan Lash (Lanlash). Again, on entering the property, this time through a more simple entrance, the drive curved gently towards the house and in 1840 opened up into a yard between the northern end of the cloistered walk and the gatehouse. By 1886/87 this second drive has become tree-lined. The route of this drive crosses a small stream and although evidence for one has yet to be found, it is probable that this stream would have to have been bridged. This drive has now gone, although the gateway exists within the curtilage wall. From the A40, two stone gateposts set back from the road and the beginnings of a very infrequently used track are all that remain.

Over the years the actual configuration of the drives within the grounds appears to have altered. In 1840 the drives may not have formed an integral unit. The tithe map indicates a wall extending southwards from the gatehouse, towards the house, on the line of the yew tunnel; it may be that there was a further gate or arch to link the two drives.

By 1887 there had been the addition of a turning circle that linked in to the original drives to the north-east of the house and it is tempting to suggest that this was constructed in about 1846, when the impressive portico is believed to have been erected.

The gardens at Aberglasney form a series of five compartments, with each area being separated from the next by built features or walls. The arcaded court to the west of the house forms the core of the gardens. To its north, and north of the house, is an area of cobbled court, lawn and informal planting. To its west is the pond garden, with woodland beyond. To its south are the two walled gardens and an area of informal woodland.

The only substantial water feature is the formal rectangular pond, sometimes referred to as the stew pond, to the west of the house and arcaded court. In 1887, the pond was about 61m x 23m. There may have also been a small cascade on the south-eastern side to remove excess drainage water from the sloping garden; in the mid 1990s there was a small, somewhat crude, cascade here. The pond edges were then somewhat silted but some masonry blocks were visible, suggesting that it was stone-lined. As part of the late 1990s restoration programme the pond was dredged, its sides rebuilt and seven inflow channels constructed around its upper sides. It has grass slopes on its east, west and south sides, with a weeping ash at the north-west end and a cypress at the south end. Along the north side a raised terrace, with a flight of wide steps up to it, has been built against the north wall of the garden, with a sloping bed below it. In the north-east corner a raised cafe terrace has been built.

To the north of the pond is a substantial rubble-built stone wall, with scalloped top, that separates the garden associated with the pond area and the more utilitarian buildings, stables and coach house to the north. Standing for the most part to about 3m high, it contains several blocked entrances. It is not clear whether these entrances were original or whether they were later constructed to allow access to the range of glasshouses (shown in 1887) from the stable courtyard. At the west end of the wall are the footings of a small glasshouse, all that remains of those in existence in 1887. The style of masonry is visually different from, and cruder than, all the other stonework examined at Aberglasney; there is far less use of the flat slabs that are incorporated into the walls of the walled gardens and the arcaded court.

To the north of the arcaded court is an isolated gatehouse. The building is two-storey, of rubble stone construction with ramped corner buttresses to the south-east. A cobbled road passes under a low, rounded arched and tunnel-vaulted passage in the centre. The cobbling under the arch is uneven and grooved, suggesting long years of use. Archaeological excavation in 1999-2000 in the area to the east of the gatehouse and between it and the arcaded court has revealed that the gatehouse stood on the north side of a court that was either entirely cobbled or criss-crossed by cobbled paths. Several layers of cobbling indicate different phases and the area is also crossed by a number of drains. The cobbling runs right up to the foot of the north wall of the arcaded court, with a shallow drain along the base of the wall. Half way along there are two steps up the slope next to the wall. A single yew tree towards the west end of the cobbled court is all that remains of planting in this area.

Continuing southwards from the roadway under the gatehouse is a road of patterned cobbling, flanked by shallow drains and cobbling. This runs beneath the north side of the arcaded court and a short distance beyond, within the court. This section is at a higher level and more carefully constructed, using narrower stones and laying them more parallel to each other. Beyond, to the south, excavation has revealed that this cobbled road probably continued to the other side of the court but at some stage was robbed out, as this part is now gone. To the east of the gatehouse a low wall runs eastwards from it and then turns to run southwards to the arcaded court. The west side of the yew tunnel is planted on top of this wall. Next to the wall east of the gatehouse are

the footings of some small buildings and a stone-covered drain. The cobbling on this side stops at the drain.

It would now appear that the gatehouse is probably of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century date and that it stood on the north side of an enclosed, partly or entirely cobbled court, with buildings along its north side, east of the gatehouse. The cobbled road led towards the house, and within the arcaded court to a garden building in its south-east corner (see below). It has been suggested by Thomas Lloyd and others that the gatehouse may have been the result of the rebuilding programme undertaken by Bishop Rudd when he acquired the property in about 1600. There is now some consensus that the building incorporates a genuine medieval arch, which may have come from one or more sources. It may have originated from the Bishop's Palace at Abergwili, the suggested source for the window incorporated in the bailiff's house adjacent to the road. It is possible that, during the reassembly of the arch at Aberglasney, the configuration was changed; this hypothesis is based on the joints at the back of the arch being open. If the arch had been assembled so that the joints fitted as intended, the top angle of the arch would have been more acute and therefore conform more to the Early English or Perpendicular styles. However, it is felt that the entire building is not of medieval origin. The construction and design are not convincingly medieval. The first-floor arrangement, where access could only be made by ladder or stone steps in front of one of the main arches, is curious, as is the lowness of the archway.

The arcaded court to the west of the house is the dominant and most interesting feature of the garden. It lies on ground sloping gently away from the house towards the pond, to which there is access from the west range of the court, through two arched doorways. On the north, there are two arched entrances through to the cobbled court and on the south there is a doorway into the upper walled garden.

The court, the structure of which has been restored in 1998-99, is enclosed on all but the house side by high walls fronted by round-arched arcading of 21 arches. The south range is about 30m long, the west range about 45m and the north range about 30m. The masonry along the length of the west range stands to an average height of about 4m, although the slope of the court means that the height of the eastern end of the south and north ranges is only about 3m. Above the tunnel vaults behind the arches is a raised walk about 3m wide, flanked by low parapets with flat stone coping, now restored. The outer parapets on the west and north sides are scalloped at intervals. Access to the walk is via a modern ramp up the east end of the north side. Beneath this, the remnants of steps up the inner side of the wall are visible. The surface of the walk is now gravelled and there is an old yew tree growing in the south-west corner. At the east end of the south range are the remains of a flight of steps leading down to the footings of a building in the corner of the court.

The vaulting of the arcaded court varies from range to range. In the west range there is a continuous, tunnel-vaulted walk beneath the raised walk. This would appear to be the most sophisticated and well built range. The north and south sides are more clumsily built, the arches lower and heavier. The north side is not at right-angles to the west range and there is a curious, squashed doorway into the court at its west end. The irregularities of the north and south sides are compounded by the blocking of three of the arches. In the north-west corner there is a small, dog-leg passage giving access through to the pond area. In the centre of its north wall is a niche that was probably designed to hold a light, as the passage is rather dark. Small holes at regular intervals along the back wall of the west arcaded walk may have been for a similar purpose - to hold supports for lights. In the south-east corner archaeological excavation has revealed

an area of decorative cobbling and the footings of a small garden building or pavilion of some kind.

The interior of the arcaded court has been comprehensively excavated and a number of its historic components are visible at present. At the upper end, close to the house, are traces of a terrace and three flights of steps down from it to the former cobbled path leading to the pavilion. Below this is an area of 'corduroy' beds (shallow, parallel ridges of soil) which probably indicate a flowerbed. Most of the remainder of the interior revealed little of its layout from excavation, although the remains of the nineteenth-century fountain were found in the centre. At the foot of the slope a low, robbed out revetment wall was found, with three flights of steps leading down to a cobbled path, which remains, running parallel with and next to the west range. The central steps are the widest and are not aligned on the central opening in the west range. They were probably aligned with the earlier house, now gone, and the central opening was inserted at a later date than the original construction of the range, possibly in the nineteenth century.

The dating and development of this arcaded court and its raised walk have long been problematic. It is only now, following comprehensive archaeological excavation, that they are becoming clearer. It would appear (Blockley, pers. comm.) that the west range was built soon after 1600 by Bishop Rudd. The court was enclosed on the north and south sides by walls (the outer walls of the present court) only. The terrace and steps were built next to the house, the cobbled path installed and the interior laid out with at least one bed, probably more. The foot of the slope was retained with a wall and the steps and cobbled path were contemporary. At the same time, or slightly later, the pavilion was built. Soon afterwards, still in the early seventeenth century, a second phase of building, probably by Rudd's son, took place. This consisted of the building of the arcading on the north and south sides and the creation of the raised walk on top, reached by steps. Cosmetic changes only appear to have been made to the court in the eighteenth century.

The function of the court has been the subject of debate in recent years, with some suggestions for utilitarian use (Howes, 1992; Briggs, 1999). However, the archaeological evidence points reasonably clearly to an ornamental layout and function. Confusion perhaps arises because of the rather ponderous, almost crude, nature of the north and south ranges, which could be explained by the provincialism of their builders. The first documentary evidence for the raised walk comes from Joseph Gulston's notes (1783) in which he records that Aberglasney was 'An old house with a large Hall. In the centre is a Staircase which carry's you to a chapel of which nothing now is remaining but the Pulpit which is old and curious. There is a terras round a court built on Stone Arches'. In the late nineteenth century the description in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* (1892) records flower borders at the sides of the raised walk at that time. The Cambrians' Llandeilo-Fawr field trip, which was reported in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1893) states: 'Aberglasney House - This old mansion, now the property of Mr F Lloyd-Philipps, was built by Bishop Rudd. The poet Dyer also lived here. Close to the house is a gateway standing by itself in the garden, and some curious cloisters having a semi-ecclesiastical appearance, but without any architectural details which would serve to fix their date'. The tithe map (1840) for Aberglasney is interesting in that a further, south-westerly extension to the court is recorded.

During the nineteenth century the Phillips family undertook major work on the gardens, including the arcaded court, which was extensively repaired. The central arched opening in the west range was probably made at this time. The interior was laid out

informally, with winding paths. A pair of Irish yews, which were only removed in the late 1990s, stood flanking the path opposite the central opening. A fountain was added in the centre of the court in the late nineteenth century. Excavations in the mid 1990s revealed the base of this fountain. It does not appear on the 1887 survey but was there by 1892, when an article in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* records its existence: 'In the quadrangle, a large stone-bordered pool of water has been formed, with a fountain, aquatic plants and gold fish in the centre'. It was later abandoned, filled in and used as a raised flowerbed. After this there appears to have been little change. The garden, and with it the arcaded court, fell into disuse and dereliction after the 1970s.

To the north of the house development of the gardens in the late 1990s has radically altered the appearance of the garden. The drives and turning circle have gone and been replaced with a level lawn, flanked on the north side by a few conifers and on the east side by a bank planted with a single conifer, a holly and some rhododendrons. A low stone-built boundary wall about 0.75m high, used to form the boundary of the garden with the single track local road that leads towards the outbuildings and Pigeon House. Until the early 1990s this was in good condition. As part of the restoration programme it has now been demolished and replaced by an iron fence.

Some of the early plantings shown in the Allen photographs (1871) survive and have matured. There have also been some more recent plantings commissioned by Mr Miller and these also are thriving. The earlier plantings include: Coast Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), Cowtailed pine (*Cephalotaxus fortunei*), Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*), Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), Fern-leaved Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* "Asplenifolia"), Large-leaved/Cut-leaved Lime (*Tilia platyphyllos* "Laciniata"), the oaks *Quercus robur* "Fennessii" and *Quercus robur f. pendula*, Purple Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* "Purpurea") and the variegated sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus* "Variegatus").

To the north-west of the house is an unusual yew tunnel, orientated north-south. This feature was created by the branches from the yews on one side (the west side) being trained over the path so that they rooted where they touched the earth on the other side of the path. The branches could have been either pegged or planted to encourage rooting. The yews were planted on the footings of the east wall of the former cobbled, gatehouse court.

There has been much speculation as to the age of these trees, with estimates as old as 1,000 years. However, recent dendrochronological work indicates that they are at most 250 years old. The most probable date for the tunnel is the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the gardens were undergoing radical transformation, including much planting. A copy of a watercolour in the National Monuments Record, Aberystwyth, clearly shows a neatly clipped yew tunnel with a path along its length; this painting is believed to date to about 1820. Also in the archives is one of a series of photographs taken by C S Allen in 1871, again the arch is clearly shown as being well maintained.

The area occupied by the walled gardens is extensive, when compared with the rest of the garden area, and the specimen trees recorded within the gardens in 1887 suggest that their function was far from solely utilitarian.

Today the walls of the two walled gardens, which lie to the south and south-west of the arcaded court, stand to an average height of about 2.5 m and the enclosures are linked to the rest of the garden by steps through arched entrances. In the north-east corner of the uppermost, eastern garden is a substantial arch leading through to the outbuildings to the south of the house.

The configuration of the walled gardens changed between the Tithe survey of 1840 and the First Edition Ordnance Survey of 1887. In the 1840 survey there are four, not two, walled enclosures. First is a garden enclosed on three sides immediately to the south of the house; as the land slopes, this is the upper garden. Below that, to the west, is a completely enclosed garden, the northern wall of which is the south range of the arcaded court and a western extension of the terrace walk. There has, in some places, been a certain amount of collapse, including within the area of the extension. This collapse has revealed that there was a clean return to the wall, suggesting either that the parapet extension was arched or that it was a figment of the surveyor's imagination. To the west of that again, there is a further garden that is enclosed on three sides, being open at the northern, pond end. Below (to the west of) the pond is a further enclosed area, now gone.

By 1887 the uppermost (most easterly) garden has been lost and the area is occupied by outbuildings, kennels and an aviary. The next westerly garden remains similar to its appearance on the earlier survey, with the exception that the west end of the northern boundary, which was shown in 1840 as the terrace walk extension, is now shown as a single wall. The next garden to the west, which was shown as enclosed on three sides, now has a wall to the north. The three enclosed areas have been amalgamated to form two completely enclosed walled gardens. They are laid out internally with perimeter and cross paths. The enclosed area to the west of the pond is much as shown on the earlier survey, with the addition of a perimeter path and glasshouse. A substantial range of glass is also shown against the boundary wall to the north of the pond.

As part of the general restoration scheme of the late 1990s, the two walled garden areas, by this time disused and much overgrown, were reconstructed as ornamental gardens. The upper garden, designed by Penelope Hobhouse, was laid out with a central oval surrounded by gravel paths and herbaceous borders. The lower garden, designed by Hal Moggridge, was given a formal, rectilinear layout of box-edged vegetable and herb beds and bordering gravel paths.

The ground to the east of the upper garden is considerably higher than the ground level within it and the wall on this side is chiefly a revetment wall, with a parapet walk along the top. Behind, is a disused aviary, thought to date from 1882 - 85 and to have been built for ornamental pheasants. The building consists of a run of iron-framed cages (now without netting) backed by low yellow brick and slate-roofed housing. The building is derelict, with the roof caved in in places, the walls in poor condition and the hooped iron frames rusty. Behind this is a small area of informal ornamental woodland, with winding paths through it.

Sources

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