

PLAS BERW

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 42 (ANG)
OS Map	114
Grid Ref	SH 465 718
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Anglesey
Community Council	Llanidan; Llanfihangel Esceifiog

Designations Listed buildings: House with courtyard and walls and barn [which barn not clear] Grade II*, remains of older house Grade II; Scheduled Ancient Monument (ruined house and courtyard garden). Environmentally sensitive area.

Site Evaluation **Grade II***

Primary reasons for grading Well preserved early seventeenth-century complex of house with courtyard garden, adjoining ruins of older house. Other features may be contemporary or nearly so. Deer park of fifteenth century at least with much of its original wall still standing.

Type of Site Deer park; other park areas; small courtyard garden; other garden areas around house.

Main Phases of Construction Seventeenth century, early nineteenth century.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Plas Berw is situated on a north-west facing slope near Pentre Berw, facing into the slope, with its courtyard garden in front, and the expanse of Malltraeth Marsh at its back. It is an ancient site and clearly not chosen for any aesthetic reason, but the area in front of the house would have been sheltered on all sides. The deer park lies partly on the high ground at the top of the ridge, extending down the steep slope and into the low ground on the edge of the marsh. A disused railway line passes very close to the house and bisects the park.

The Plas is an example of the 'unit system' house of which there are several in north-west Wales. In this system, when extra space is required, instead of enlarging the existing house or demolishing it and replacing it with a larger mansion, a second house is built immediately adjoining, or very close to, the first. At Plas Berw a fifteenth-century house, now ruined, was enlarged slightly during the sixteenth century, but in 1615 a completely new house of almost equal size was built at right angles, joining only at the north corner of the original house and communicating only at first-floor level. Since this time there have been other additions, but

it is the 1615 house which is the main building on the site today.

It is a long early Renaissance house with two storeys and attic dormers, built of a warm-toned, light-coloured stone. The windows are mullioned, and there is a large stair-turret on the north-west side and a chimney at either end. The roof is of slates. The main entrance, on the south-east, is off-centre in the facade, but opposite the entrance to the stair turret. A stone over the door has the initials of Thomas Holland, with the family arms and motto and the date 1615. The ruins of the old house are of similar stone, and also have a tower, which in this case was part of the living accommodation.

The carriage house, now converted to a dwelling, is shown on the tithe map of 1841, but not on an estate map of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, or the Ordnance Survey 2-in. manuscript map of 1818-23. It was, therefore, built in the 1820s or 30s. It has been repointed and modernised recently and it is difficult to tell what is entirely new, although the slate roof clearly is. The brick arches over the large doorways (not blocked but now infilled with windows and glass doors) echo the brick surrounds of the circular windows, and brick lintels over the doors and square windows, of the building just across the yard, at the back of the main house, which may therefore be contemporary.

The farm buildings do not appear on the estate and manuscript maps mentioned above, but are shown on the tithe map, being therefore presumably of similar date to the carriage house. There is a barn which forms part of a range converted to a dwelling in 1991, along with other buildings, all stone, repaired and re-roofed, forming three sides of a square. The complex lies to the west of the houses, on the boundary between the deer park and the 'Park Newydd' to the north.

A stone building, with the appearance of a barn, close to the back of the house, may have been stables, though with only one central door. It has a rectangular window either side of the door, three small circular ones at attic level, and a slate roof. The windows have brick surrounds like the brick arches over the carriage house door, but although this building is also shown on the 1841 tithe map (and not the earlier ones), it appears to be much smaller than it now is. A second small building - a stone shed - at right-angles is close by, and also appears on the tithe map.

Some distance away to the north-east is a barn which appears very ancient, with stone-arched doorways and tiny gaps in the stonework rather than windows, and it is shown on the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century estate map and the 1818-23 Ordnance Survey manuscript map. It may possibly be contemporary with the 1615 house. Later maps show it as roofless, but it was re-used during the Second World War, for military purposes, and was partly re-roofed at that time and altered inside, with the addition of much concrete. It is now again disused, but remains in fair condition. Another building, now gone, is shown near it on nineteenth-century maps.

The park occupies part of the ridge along the south-east side of Malltraeth Marsh and part of the almost flat ground at its foot which is just above the level of the marsh. The views, such

as they are, are across the marsh to the north-west.

The site is an ancient one; not only are there extant remains of a fifteenth-century house, but mentions of the name go back to the time of the Welsh princes in the early medieval period. There was no house on the site preceding that of which the ruins survive, as has been shown by recent excavation, but there is certainly the possibility of an earlier house nearby and of medieval origins for the deer park.

The estate passed into the hands of a branch of the Holland family, of English origin but already domiciled in Wales, through the marriage of Elinor, heiress of Plas Berw, with John Holland, which probably took place towards the end of the fifteenth century. This couple may have built the fifteenth-century house, or, more likely, it may have been built by Elinor's father, Ithel ap Howel. Their son Owen Holland was in possession of the estate by 1515 but does not seem to have lived there; by 1529 he was dead. He left heirs, however, and the family continued in possession of Plas Berw throughout the sixteenth century, marrying into most of the notable families of north Wales and serving as High Sheriff of Anglesey at times (Owen himself had been High Sheriff for life). They also increased their holdings and acquired the Berw coalfield.

Between 1597 and 1603 Thomas Holland, eldest surviving male in a large family, inherited Plas Berw. In 1610 he was made Sheriff in his turn, and in the same year bought a house at Beaumaris, where he apparently lived. In 1615, however, he built the new house at Plas Berw, a fact recorded in a date stone with the family arms over the door. He never married and his nephew, another Owen Holland, was his heir; Owen's eldest son and grandson both died young and were succeeded in 1708 by another Thomas, Owen's grandson through a younger son, who did not live at Plas Berw but let the house, although he kept it in repair himself and also kept deer in the park. This Thomas was the last of the Hollands to own Berw, as both his sons predeceased him, and the estate went to his niece and then her daughter, who married John Griffith of Carreglwyd in 1755. The two estates of Berw and Carreglwyd both descended to the son of this marriage, Holland Griffith, following the deaths of John Griffith in 1776 and his wife Mary in 1799.

Plas Berw has suffered much at the hands of road and railway engineers. The walled deer park lies to the south-west of the house, and is bisected by the railway line, built about 1841, which also passes uncomfortably close to the house, on an embankment which curtails the view even more than the natural ridge. It crosses the drive on a bridge and continues northwards through the middle of the rest of the park. Improvements to the B4419 to the east have also taken their toll, sweeping away the whole length of the deer park wall on the south-east.

The orchard and kitchen garden lay to the north-east of the house, and around them was woodland, of which small remnants survive, with, beyond, a rabbit warren, wood and further areas of park, one now containing a recent pond. There does not appear to be a record of when these park areas were added, but they never seem to have been walled, and that they post-date the deer park is clear from a reference to 'Park Newydd' in 1754. Interestingly, the woodland enclosures around the garden are called, on an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century estate

map, 'Gwinllan coed': 'gwinllan' means vineyard, but the map does not show a vineyard, so perhaps the name recalls an earlier use of the orchard area. Part of this area continued to be shown as woodland on maps into the twentieth century, and was thus relatively recently cleared and ploughed.

There are in the deer park the remains of some features which were clearly added for ornamental effect, and it is possible that in the nineteenth century an attempt was made to update the landscape by adding some decorative and romantic features. As there seems to have been some building activity in the early part of the century, it may be reasonable to assign the developments in the park to the same period, and to ascribe them perhaps to the son of Holland Griffith, updating his property on inheritance. The features added to the deer park may have included a folly and a 'hermit's cell', as well as improvements to the natural stream which runs along the southern edge of the park. The remains of an avenue of beech trees along the drive, windswept but still imposing, may also date from this time.

The deer park wall forms the boundary on the south and south-west, and the modern road wall which replaces it is the boundary on the south-east; this wall, with a fence, continues along the south-east side of the 'Park Newydd' area. The rest of the boundaries are modern fences.

The park wall stands to a fair height, averaging perhaps 1.5 m, although it has collapsed in places. Some parts are over 2 m high, probably the original full height. The wall is of dry-stone construction and tapers from base to top. Stylistically it is impossible to date, but logically it should be contemporary at least with the 1615 house, possibly with the fifteenth-century one.

The stony main drive, approaching from the B4419 to the east, begins by heading north and then makes a sharp bend to the west, approaching along the north-east side of the courtyard garden and the house before swinging round to the rear. A railway bridge now crosses it immediately before it reaches the house. The drive continues to the farm complex west of the house, and formerly a track led off to the north-west, into the marsh. This now appears to be disused and impassable, and appears as a line of scrub crossing the marsh.

At the point where the main drive takes its sharp turn, another track leads off to the north-east, towards the 'Park Newydd'. It is unsurfaced and unfenced, but quite well made with revetting to keep it level, and it leads to the old stone barn which is shown on the earliest available maps. Beyond this a footpath continues to the village of Pentre Berw to the north-east.

A stream runs across the south-west end of the deer park, tumbling down the steep slope of the ridge in a series of rapids or small waterfalls. Although the slope is naturally steep, the stream bed shows signs of having been altered to create one larger waterfall at the steepest point, and there are small pools and waterfalls both above and below this which may also be artificial. The area is now overgrown but the only ornamental planting in the park (recent) is here.

A pond at the bottom of the slope was created by the previous owner of Plas Berw, hence

quite recently, but the dam has burst and the pond is now just a boggy hollow, gradually filling up with trees. Near the western corner of the park was a small bridge, long since gone. A new pond in one of the fields north of the house is purely for agricultural purposes.

On a small level area part way down the slope of the ridge, to the south-west of the house (at about SH 465 716), are what appear to be the overgrown foundations of a small, almost-square building. There is a local tradition concerning the building of a tower by Elinor, the first heiress of Berw, which may in fact have its origin in the tower attached to the original house; but these foundations could represent a nineteenth-century attempt to update the legend and lend some romance to the hitherto strictly functional deer park. However, John Williams, writing in 1861, mentions a tower in this connection which he describes, with some detail, as circular and ancient (having been mentioned in a document of 1503), and illustrates; he places this 'near Berw Uchaf'. The visible foundations are towards the Berw Uchaf end of the park, although they are much nearer Plas Berw itself. There is also a small, apparently round, building shown on the 1818-23 map in the right area, but this does not appear on the smaller-scale and rather congested published version of this (1840-41). If the foundations are not those of the tower mentioned by John Williams, whatever building they do represent had clearly disappeared by his time, or else was a purely functional farm building not meriting his attention.

In the upper part of the deer park, built against a small rocky outcrop close to the stream (about SH 465 715), is a small 'hermit's cell', which clearly once had a door and a window opening, and may have been roofed. It is most likely to be a romantic folly.

The garden area at present is very small, and although the utilitarian area was once a good size, the ornamental garden was probably never extensive. The most important remaining part of the garden is the small, seventeenth-century walled courtyard garden in front of the main house; apart from this there is another partly walled garden to the south-west of the house, which was probably originally a yard, and the actual area of the derelict fifteenth-century house is also now used as garden space.

Small additional areas of garden have been recently created at the back of the main house and around the carriage house, which is now a dwelling. On a map dated 1920 there is a circular feature, probably a small formal garden, in the angle of the northern end of the main house and the added north-west wing; this has now been replaced by a small, informal rockery. The former orchard and kitchen garden have been much reduced in size and turned over to general garden use, although there are some young fruit trees in the former orchard area. An imposing gateway, possibly contemporary with the main house, gives access to this area, but it may not be in its original position. The sundial marked on the 1920 map near the corner of the orchard has disappeared.

The courtyard garden is of great interest as it must be contemporary with the house built in 1615. It is well preserved and has been recently excavated. The results of the excavation confirm the date, and suggest that it was created over a paved courtyard on the north side of the fifteenth-century hall-house, now ruined, with garden soil being imported for the purpose. All the current planting is modern, as might be expected, but most of the structure is original, although

following drainage works the ground level is slightly lower than before - perhaps back to its original level.

The house forms the north-west side of the garden, with a step up to the door, from which an ash path once led across the garden. The south-west side is the wall of the ruined hall-house, which also had a door giving on to the garden; this has since become a way through the ruins to the back entrance of the extension built on to the 1615 house, and the further garden and yard areas beyond.

The north-east wall is a purpose-built garden wall, with a gateway through it which is the main access to the house. The wall is stepped up over the arched gateway, which has a heraldic plaque over it. There are steps down from this gateway, but a path leading directly from them was not found during the excavation, so access may always have been along the inside of the wall and the front of the house, as at present. The south-east wall has been demolished, probably when the railway embankment was built, and a raised border is now retained by a dry-stone wall built from its stones, with a flight of three steps up in the centre. It is difficult to date these, and although they are not exactly similar to the steps down from the main entrance (which may in any case have been rebuilt), there are similarities, and it is possible that the three steps are original and once led to a doorway in the south-east wall.

There have always been drainage problems in the courtyard garden, due no doubt to its position at the foot of a fairly steep slope, and the excavation, which was necessitated by modern attempts to drain the area effectively, revealed the evidence of several previous efforts to the same end. The surface had therefore been much disturbed, but the only evidence for consistent paving was from the surface pre-dating the construction of the 1615 house. The stone-free soil interpreted as imported garden soil was concentrated along the wall of the hall-house, suggesting a layout similar to today's, with borders round the edges and an open space in the middle. The surface of this open space, apparently not paving, may have been gravel, grass, or another type of hard surface, although no direct evidence was found.

Originally there was a crescent of cobbles in front of the doorstep, but later a brick surface was laid over this, flush with the doorstep, necessitated presumably by a build-up of soil in the garden creating mud over the cobbles. The only path found was the ash path, pre-dating the brick surface. The modern path, following the wall (with a border between) from the entrance archway to the house, and then running along the front of it, is gravelled. There are modern wooden gates in the entrance.

An area on the south-west side of the ruined hall-house was clearly once a yard, shown on several maps as containing sheds and small outbuildings, some of them evidently pigsties. It has a wall on two sides, in addition to the wall of the ruined house, which may be ancient.

The outbuildings have now gone, except for one small one on the south-west wall, and the area is lawned and treated as a garden. The floor area of the ruined house is also now grassed over and treated as garden space, running up on to the base of the railway embankment where the south-east wall of the house has collapsed.

The former orchard and kitchen garden are clearly shown on all the available maps, though on the Ordnance Survey manuscript map and the late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century estate map they are shown as a single rectangle, called on the latter 'Gardd' (garden). Recently they have been much reduced in size and the greater part of their area returned to grazing; if they were walled, as seems likely, the walls have gone. Only a stub of dry-stone wall remains along the side nearest the house, the south-west. Some years ago raised areas, perhaps former raised beds, could be seen in the kitchen garden area, but these have now been ploughed out, although some indistinct features are visible on air photographs. The former extent of the garden and orchard can clearly be seen on these photographs.

The part of the former garden and orchard still in garden use is general rather than utilitarian, although there are a few young fruit trees in the former orchard area. This area is approached between a pair of stone pillars, no longer supporting gates, which may well be contemporary with the 1615 house, but it is possible that they are not in their original position, and they certainly are not contemporary with the wall stub either side. These gateposts are grand enough to have been at the drive entrance, but if so would have had to be positioned further apart than at present.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mrs P. Beckmann

Information from Mr E. P. Beckmann

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National Monuments Record report on hall-house

Aerial photographs, Cadw Ancient Monuments section

Schedule of Carreglwyd estate (1754), University College of North Wales archives, Bangor

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Secondary

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Longley D. M. T., *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, Excavations at Plas Berw, Anglesey, 1983-4

Williams J., *The History of Berw* (1861), reprinted as a supplement to the *Transactions* of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club (1915)

