

## PLAS-YN-RHIW

**Ref No** PGW (Gd) 14 (GWY)

**OS Map** 123

**Grid Ref** SH 237 282

**Former County** Gwynedd

**Unitary Authority** Gwynedd

**Community Council** Aberdaron

**Designations** Listed buildings: house Grade II\*, cottage, stable range, cart/log shed and Hen Gapel all Grade II. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Environmentally sensitive area.

**Site Evaluation** **Grade II**

**Primary reasons for grading** A small, enclosed plantsman's garden planted this century, but laid out earlier, with a spectacular view out over Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth Bay), set in a wooded park.

**Type of Site** Small enclosed ornamental garden, set in partly wooded park, with coastal views.

**Main Phases of Construction** Nineteenth century; twentieth century.

### SITE DESCRIPTION

Plas-yn-Rhiw is sited on the steep, south-east-facing slope of Mynydd Rhiw looking out across Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth), tucked into the hill behind and with the garden sloping away to south and south-east. Most of the outbuildings are to the north.

Originally a small, early seventeenth-century manor house, possibly with a medieval core, Plas-yn-Rhiw was extended to the north-east probably in the eighteenth century. Another wing was added on the north-west, the roof was raised and a verandah was added along the front in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The resulting three-storey house, with low-pitched slate roof, has a symmetrical, Georgian appearance, and the stucco has been removed to reveal the grey stone.

Very close to the house, to the south-west, is a cottage (probably eighteenth-century) almost the same size as the original house, which may have been intended to extend the accommodation, although it has since been used as domestic offices.

The ruins of a watermill to the north of the house are also of the seventeenth century, and royal permission was granted (in 1634) for the estate to grind its own

corn - a rare privilege. This may have grown out of a medieval right reserved to two local families to use a mill at Rhiw, and if the mill was in the same spot there may well have been a fourteenth-century house on the site of the present Plas.

At this time the property belonged to a family called Lewis, descendants of a princely line originating in Powys. John Lewis, who resided at Plas-yn-Rhiw in 1634, may have built the earliest part of the present house, or perhaps extended an older building. His initials and the date 1634 are on a window lintel. John's great-great-grandson Maurice or Morris appears to have left the property to his daughter, Jane, by his first wife rather than to the son of his second marriage, as it was in the hands of William Williams in 1811, when visited by Edmund Hyde Hall; Jane married a William Williams and had a son of the same name.

The second William Williams again had only a daughter, Jane Ann, to whom to leave Plas-yn-Rhiw, and she married, in 1816, Captain Lewis Moore Bennet. Following this marriage is the most likely time for the last period of extensions and improvements, when the roof was raised. The property later passed to the Bennets' grandson, another Williams, who died without issue, and it was sold in 1874. The purchaser was a Mr Roberts, who passed it on to his son; the latter did not reside at Plas-yn-Rhiw and the house was let. One tenant, Lady Strickland, is thought to have been instrumental in designing the gardens. The Roberts family retained the house and a Miss Roberts lived there for some time, but the successive members of her family who owned the house would not maintain it and she eventually moved out, following which it became derelict until finally sold to the Misses Keating in 1939.

The three Keating sisters, Laura, Honora and Eleanor, restored the house, consulting Clough Williams-Ellis, and concentrating, as he commented, on the older parts of the house, rather than stressing the Regency aspects, as he would have done. They restored the garden and planted it with a wide range of interesting plants, and also acquired as much land as they could to add to the estate, with the express purpose of giving it all to the National Trust, which they duly did. The house and garden are now cared for by a resident custodian, and opened to visitors in the spring and summer.

All the outbuildings are shown, in a layout identical to the present one and with no detectable differences except that the now ruined watermill is shown as roofed, on the 25-in. Ordnance Survey maps of 1889, 1901 and 1919. Perhaps originally built in the eighteenth century, the small stone-built dairy is now ruined and roofless but retains its part-cobbled, part-slate slab floor and slate work surface. It is the south-westernmost of the range of outbuildings north-east of the house, and opens off the cobbled courtyard which links the range to the house.

Although obviously used to serve the stables, the small tack room is structurally more closely linked with the dairy, and is probably contemporary with it, perhaps slightly postdating the rest of the range. It retains its roof. The door leads off the cobbled path alongside the dairy, leading from the former stable-yard to the yard beside the house.

A stone building probably of the seventeenth century, the stables are of modest size and, although roofless, the walls stand to their full height. There was evidently once an upper floor, probably a hayloft. There appears to be a blocked doorway at the back, but as the building is cut back into the slope behind it is hard to see where this could have led. The floor is of small cobbles set on edge, well preserved although patched with stone in a few places. Stones laid flat line surface drains, which slope into the lower middle portion of the floor, which in turn slopes towards the doorway, where there is a perforated slate through which water drains away underground.

Between the stables and the pigsties is a small carriage shed contemporary with the former. It retains its roof, door and upper storey. It is small, for a single carriage, and, like the stables, opens on to the former stable-yard.

The former pigsties consist of a small, stone-surfaced yard surrounded by a stone wall, with a gate at the north-east end and a wooden door in the south-east wall, and two remaining pens or divisions against the curving north wall. There is a more recent, roofed, shed in the north-west corner, and the whole area is now used for storage.

The southernmost of a second, probably eighteenth-century, range of outbuildings north of the first, and outside the garden, beside the road, this is called the log store but was probably originally a cart shed as it has two large double doors. It was in the process of being re-roofed at the time of the visit. This second range of outbuildings is also of stone, but more massively built than the first, and appears to be more recent.

The kennels consist of a small yard with a building at the northern end, now roofless. The yard is enclosed within high stone walls, with a wooden door to the road.

Hen Gapel was never, so far as is known, consecrated, and the name (Old Chapel) has probably become attached to it through its being used occasionally for meetings by a Methodist preacher. It was also used for a short time early in the nineteenth century as a Nonconformist Sunday school. It is certainly an interesting building as it stands, and has been the subject of alterations. It is now roofless; the north end is open (not a fallen wall), suggesting an original use as an agricultural building or cart/carriage shed. However, there are four large window openings, and a doorway with a couple of steps down on the road side (east). Timber-holes in the stonework indicate a former upper floor or gallery at the southern end but this is at odds with the existing windows. The largest of these, on the south-east, at one time reached almost to floor level, but has been partly blocked; the upper floor or gallery would have cut right across it. The Old Chapel contrasts with the other buildings in the range in that no timbers or doors remain.

A barn now houses the shop and lavatories and is located in the middle of the car park, probably the former farmyard. It is not very large and has been recently restored/rebuilt as well as being converted - it was shown on the 1889 25-in Ordnance Survey map, but not marked on the 6-in. map of a few years later, and may have been completely ruined at that time. A second large stone barn, with a slate roof,

was originally a 6-stall cow-house or shippon with a calf pen behind, probably of eighteenth-century date. It is built into quite a steep two-way slope, and the walled yard area (grassed over) in front (south) of it is terraced. The terrace extends round to the east as well, but is here much narrower. The eaves are level with the car park to the north, and between the back of the workshop and the car park is the calf pen, a small enclosed yard with high walls, into which one looks down from the car park. The building is now used as a workshop. At the far side of the front yard area are two further derelict sheds with their own small yards, probably pigsties, of early nineteenth-century date.

Very close to the house on the south side is a cottage which may have originally been intended to extend the accommodation; it is probably eighteenth-century in date, and is similar in style to the house. It has been used as a laundry, brewery and bakehouse, and has on the eastern end a potting shed and a 'summerhouse', open to the east, which was formerly a cool room or store. There is a further small lean-to outbuilding on the back (west).

A stone-built and slate-roofed privy, in a similar style to and probably of the same date as the rest of the outbuildings within the garden enclosure, is sited well away from the house. The site was clearly chosen partly to take advantage of the mill-race, which runs under the garden, as a natural drainage system.

The park is small and essentially informal, consisting of woodland and pasture, without any datable features. It is entered through a wooden gate at the southern end, and the drive, which is also a public road, more or less bisects the southern part, with all the garden falling to the west of the road. The garden is set entirely within the park, but after passing the house, garden and outbuildings, rough grazing comes right down to the road on the west, all the parkland being to the east.

There are three areas within the park, of which the northernmost, wooded, area is the largest. This extends from the east side of the road down the slope to the coast road, the lower edge being only a little above sea level and very close to the shore. The woods are composed of deciduous trees and are maintained to look natural, but contain appreciable numbers of planted trees. There is also underplanting of laurel with occasional rhododendron over most of the area (not quite reaching the lower, eastern, edge), and a very large population of ferns which may not be entirely natural in origin. There are at least two small ruined buildings in these woods, one of which is shown (already a ruin) on the 1889 25-in. Ordnance Survey map. These may be farm buildings or cottages pre-dating the planting of the woods, and may be associated with the occasional ruined stone walls which also occur. A system of well-maintained footpaths from the car park gives access to the woods.

The north-west corner of this area, alongside the road, was obviously open land until fairly recently, as the trees here are young (native deciduous varieties), and no woodland is shown here on early maps.

South of this woodland area is a steeply sloping pasture field, over which the view to the sea is obtained from the garden. Trees have been planted alongside the drive and at the lower (south-eastern) edge of the field.

The third area of the park is on the west of the house and garden, sweeping round from north to south. Closest to the garden, on west and south, is another field, gently sloping but not now grazed (it is kept mown). Beyond this are further sloping wooded areas on north, west and south; that to the west is known as the Snowdrop Wood. All these areas are shown as mixed coniferous and deciduous plantations on the 1889 map, but the trees are now mostly deciduous. Further small areas on the outer edges are currently being planted with young trees by the National Trust, including some pine trees.

Within this third area, close to the back of the house, are the ruins of the watermill, now much overgrown and planted over. The mill race is in a deep culvert to the north-east, and there is what appears to be a small level yard to the south-west.

There are some small lawn areas beside the road/drive near to the garden and car park entrances, and on one of these, under a large pine tree, and with the view over Porth Neigwl behind, a commemorative slate plaque is fixed to the wall. It was obviously erected by or at the request of the Keating sisters and carries the following inscription:

PLAS YN RHIW Given to the National Trust in memory  
of Constance Annie Keating 1860 - 1945 and of John  
William Keating 1854 - 1893 by their three daughters.  
There is no death  
While memory lives

The garden is shown in some detail, with a layout remarkably similar to that of the present day, on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of 1889. Its small scale and relationship with the house hints at a much earlier origin. The planting mostly dates from the middle third of the twentieth century. The garden is small, enclosed and compartmentalised, a plantsman's garden on an intimate scale in a natural setting.

The garden is in four main areas: the old stable-yard, level and now partly lawn, partly shrub borders; the main entrance path and wide borders flanking it; Lady Strickland's Garden, a small, enclosed, formal area, and the lawn above it; and the largest area, the main garden to the south.

The character of each area is rather different, but the style is similar. The plantings are mainly of ornamental flowering shrubs in wide beds and borders, mixed with many varieties of hardy perennials, with ornamental trees here and there to give height. In Lady Strickland's Garden and the main, southern, garden area there are box hedges to define every bed and path, which give a more rigid structure but fail to suppress the riot of plants and make the garden formal; in the two more northerly areas the hedges are absent and there is no attempt at formality.

The paths in the areas with box hedging are generally straight and the beds rectangular, but elsewhere the paths curve and the beds simply fill up the remaining space. Both types of layout have the same effect, which is to offer an ever-changing

scene as one walks around, with new groups of plants to appreciate around every curve or corner.

The garden is also unusual in that it combines an inward-looking, intimate atmosphere with a spectacular view. The view, over the huge sweep of Porth Neigwl to the north-east, is best appreciated from the level semi-circular lawn in front of the house, which, although small, is the largest clear open space in the garden. The planting here is also less interesting, as though one were expected to concentrate on the view.

The property was bought by the three Keating sisters in 1939 and later given by them to the National Trust. Immediately before this the garden suffered a period of neglect, but a tenant in residence about the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lady Strickland, is thought to have been responsible for the layout of the small part which bears her name, probably towards the end of the nineteenth century. Lady Strickland was in the habit of spending her winters in Italy, and may have wished to re-create some aspects of the formal designs she saw there in her garden at home; it is possible that she in fact laid the whole garden out, but it must have been done by the late 1880s, as the 1889 25-in. Ordnance Survey map shows a layout very similar to today's (though the stable-yard was not then part of the garden).

There is just a hint that the garden may in fact have a longer history, though not, of course, necessarily laid out as it is now. The two small rectangular enclosures which now form Lady Strickland's Garden and the main part of the garden may, judging by their shape, size, boundaries and relationship with the house, originally have been small paddocks associated with the medieval or seventeenth-century house, and if already defined in this way, may have offered an obvious site if a decision was reached in the later seventeenth or eighteenth century to make a garden. Any such garden would undoubtedly have been primarily utilitarian, but as in other gardens a gradual change to a more ornamental style might be expected. Mrs Dick, the custodian of Plas-yn-Rhiw at the time of the visit, believes that Lady Strickland's Garden was the original kitchen garden, converted by the lady to ornamental use.

The kitchen garden consists of one of the compartments within the garden, enclosed by box hedges. It is small and rectangular, consisting of two plots about 5 by 6 or 7 metres. There are paths all round the edge of the rectangular enclosure, and dividing the two plots, and the northern plot contains two small (modern) brick frames. This is the only part of the garden not at present open to the public, and is used by the Custodian for vegetable production. As there are two or three mature fruit trees within the enclosure, it is likely that this has been the kitchen garden area for some time.

## **Sources**

### **Primary**

Information from former custodian, Mrs M Dick, and present custodian, M Wynne, Esq.

Plan of garden and plant list by J. R. Hubbard (1994)

**Secondary**

Hyde Hall, E, *A Description of Caernarvonshire (1809-1811)*, ed. from original manuscript by Jones, E Gwynne (1952)

Keating, M H, *Plas-yn-Rhiw* (1957)

Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, *Inventory*, Caernarvonshire Vol. III (1964)

Dick, M, 'A Tale of Three Sisters' in Verey, R (ed.), *Secret Gardens* (1994)

National Trust Members' Handbook (1995)