

DOWNING

Ref No.	PGW (C) 3
OS Map	116
Grid Ref	SJ 155 785
County	Flintshire
District	Flintshire

Community Council Holywell

Designations Listed building: Stables Grade II
Tree Preservation Order

Site Evaluation Grade II

Primary reasons for grading

Grounds laid out in picturesque style by Thomas Pennant, the eighteenth-century naturalist and antiquary. Later additions by his son David, including an important collection of early nineteenth-century trees.

Type of Site

Medium-sized picturesque landscape

Main Phases of Construction

1760s and early to mid nineteenth century.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Downing was originally a Carolean house built in about 1627 and altered by Thomas Pennant, who removed the outbuildings which were attached to the house and built a new block to the south in about 1766. Pennant wrote in his History of Holywell and Whitford (1796): 'built a house which was much too large for the estate. The stones were brought from Nant-y-bi a dingle opposite to the house. There is a tradition that the stones were rolled along a platform from the top of the quarry, raised on an inclined plane until they reached the building, and there were elevated as the work increased in height, till the whole was finished. The house is in the form of a Roman H, a mode of architecture very common in Wales at that period. On the front is the pious motto frequent on the Welsh house, 'Heb Dduw heb ddim, a duw a digon,' which signifies 'Without God there is nothing, with God enough'. Thomas Pennant inherited Downing in 1763 on the death of his father David Pennant, and described Downing as having 'partly transome, partly sashed windows. By consulting a drawing of it in that state, may be known the changes made by myself'. A

print of Downing published by J. & J. Boydell in 1792 illustrates how Downing must have looked after Thomas Pennant's improvements, with gothicized domestic quarters.

David Pennant, son of Thomas Pennant added a library wing to house his father's books in 1814, plus another wing to the south. Thomas Wyatt carried out further improvements for the Fieldings in about 1858 (Lady Fielding was David Pennant's only surviving child). These were to include the addition of oriel windows, a portico with bay window between the two original Carolean wings, and crow-stepped gables, to name a few of the Victorian gothic improvements. The house was gutted by fire in 1922 and demolished in 1953 as a dangerous structure.

A stable yard was erected in about 1766 by Thomas Pennant on the south side of the house having removed the original stables and utility buildings which were attached to the house. One range is in brick with a central tower with pitched roof of slate with terracotta ridge tiles. An engraving by Moses Griffiths of 1792 shows this central section surmounted by a smaller tower with a weather vane, no longer extant. This central section is two-storeyed, the upper section having a demi-lune window with a dressed stone surround. The central door is surrounded by an engaged archway in stone with a string course running across the archway in the same stone giving the whole a segmental appearance. There is also a line of matching dressed stone at ground level. The sections each side of the tower are half a storey lower, one being pebble dashed the other still exposed brick. Nineteenth-century additions include a five-bay carriage house with accommodation over. Also of this date a possible implement shed with dovecote over. However the rear of the building would appear to be older with a row of blocked in arches at ground level. This area is surrounded by a dressed stone wall on two sides, the wall on the north supporting a bank. Steps on this bank lead to a doorway in the wall with dressed stone quoins and arch.

The small area of parkland lies to the east and above the site of the house. There are some specimens of Quercus robur to the eastern side of the park. The park lies between and to the south of the picturesque landscape, and provides the link between the eastern and western parts of the landscape.

The main entrance drive runs from south to north just to the west of the parkland, leading to the east side of the site of the house. Two tunnels, now both disused, gave access to the Nant-y-bi valley without having to cross the public road. A castellated gothic folly tower was built in 1810 at northern end of park, probably by David Pennant son of Thomas Pennant. This has undergone several phases of alteration and addition, and is now a private house. In its garden is the 'Fairy Oak' which Pennant described as 'a spreading Oak of great antiquity, size and extent of branches'.

The picturesque landscape of Downing is located in a shallow but sheltered valley approximately one mile south of Mostyn and half a mile north-east of Whitford. The valley is about one mile long and runs in a north-east/south-west direction. There are several dingles running at right angles to this. On the east side of the park is another valley called the Nant-y-bi which forms one of the main sections of the picturesque layout by Thomas Pennant. To the west of the house the ground flattens out onto the adjacent parkland of the Mostyn estate. The two estates are divided by a grassy tree-lined track stretching from the farm of Coed Isaf in the north, and to the Pennsylvania Lodge of

Mostyn in the south-west. Like many landowners in north Wales Thomas Pennant was able to improve his estate by exploiting the supply of lead on his land: 'With the estate, I luckily found a rich mine of lead ore, which enabled me to make the great improvements I did'. The picturesque layout begins immediately to the south and west of the house. 'My grounds consist of very extensive walks along the fine swelling lands, beneath the shady depth of the glens, or through the contracted meads which meander quite to the shore, and the ancient Pharos on Garreg.' The Pharos is a ruined warning tower on the hill of Garreg to the south-west of the house. The area of dingles to the west of the house were laid out with walks and two sets of steps can still be seen suspended in the banks. The valley immediately behind and to the west of the house was laid out with a series of lakes utilising the Nant Sir Roger, five in all connected by weirs. In two places the water disappears under ground completely only to reappear again. Typical picturesque contrivances are in play here such as a ruined abbey, in fact disguising a mill, another mill and waterfalls. The ruined abbey was demolished as dangerous in the early 1990s. Access to the valley of the Nant-y-bi is via two tunnels to the east of the house. One being by the tower (not built until nineteenth century) and the other being in the southern end of the park. 'But I soon laid open the natural beauties of the place, and by the friendly exchange Sir Roger Mostyn made with me, enlarged the fine scenery of the broken grounds, the woods, and the command of water. The walks in the near grounds, the fields, and the deep and darksome dingles, are at least three miles in extent, and the dingle not ill united with the open grounds, by a subterraneous passage.'

Subsequently Thomas Pennant's son David carried out a considerable amount of planting including many tree species that were being introduced in the early nineteenth century. He was a considerable collector of plants from all over the world, both woody and herbaceous. An American garden was also noted. In his notes David Pennant describes various borders including the Fortress border which may have been by the Tower. But no trace remains of these now, but it would seem that they were situated on the flat ground around the house. An Ordnance Survey map of 1912 shows formal gardens around the house as does a photograph of 1920 from the sale catalogue, but there is no hint of them now.

The kitchen garden is situated to the south-west of the site of the house, and south-west of the stable yard. The site slopes to the west. The garden is of rectangular shape with an additional 'lug' in the north eastern corner. The walls are made of brick. There are doorways in all four walls and two in the north wall. The main entrance to the walled garden is in the north-eastern corner just inside the entrance to the stable yard. The foundations of the glasshouses and the cold frames remain at the northern end of the garden. Fruit trees remain on the eastern wall though these are no longer trained and have grown to their natural inclination. There are two lines of overgrown box running north to south down the centre of the garden once lining a central pathway.

On the outside of the northern wall are a potting shed and bothy now very derelict. Surrounding them is a small yard separating it from the stable yard.

Sources

Primary

Sale Particulars (1920): Clwyd Record Office (Hawarden).
Nantlys MSS: Clwyd Record Office (Hawarden).

Secondary

Pennant, T., The History of the Parishes of Whiteford and Holywell (1796).

Bevan-Evans, M., 'Thomas Pennant and Downing', Flintshire Historical Society 14 (1953/54).

Thompson, T., Report on Downing Estate, Whitford, Clwyd County Council (1975).

Pratt, D., and A.G. Veysey, A Handlist of the Topographical Prints of Clwyd (1977), nos 656-61.

Hubbard, E., Clwyd (1986), pp. 455-56.