

**CADW/ICOMOS REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS
OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST IN WALES**

SITE DOSSIER

SITE NAME Dewstow House

REF. NO. PGW (Gt) 44

OS MAP 172 GRID REF. ST 466889

FORMER COUNTY Monmouthshire

COMMUNITY COUNCIL Caerwent

DESIGNATIONS Listed building: Dewstow House Grade II

SITE EVALUATION Grade II*

Primary reasons for grading

Survival more or less intact of very rare and unusual underground gardens, dating from about 1900, with underground, top-lit chambers for growing ferns, laid out with artificial rockwork, pools, channels and fountains.

TYPE OF SITE

Informal gardens, with a network of underground chambers and passages as the principal feature; rockwork pools and paths above ground

MAIN PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

c. 1900

VISITED BY/DATE Elisabeth Whittle/October 1991

HOUSE

Dewstow House

Grid ref ST 466889

Date/style early 19th century/classical

Brief description

Dewstow House is a small 2-storey classical house, situated north-west of Caldicot. It lies on a low ridge above the coastal plain, on a south-facing slope, and there are fine views from the south (entrance) front across the coastal plain to the Bristol Channel and beyond. A portico with six columns runs the whole length of the south front, below which steps, also the full length of the house, lead down to the tarmac turning circle in front of the house.

The house was built before 1804, when John Proctor (d. 1837) lived there. In about 1890 the house was bought by the horticulturalist and breeder of shire horses, Henry Oakley (d. 1940). It was he who built the underground gardens.

OUTBUILDINGS

Name Various outbuildings

Grid ref ST 466889

Date/style, and brief description

To the NW of the house are various utilitarian outbuildings, once used as potting sheds etc. They are of simple stone construction, and are used as stores, garages etc.

THE PLEASURE GARDEN

Grid ref ST 4661889

Date/style c. 1900/naturalistic; formal; underground naturalistic

GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

The gardens of Dewstow House occupy about seven acres, and lie mainly to the west and south of the house. They were mainly made by Henry Oakley who lived here from about 1890 to 1940. It is probable that they were made early on in his occupancy, probably in about 1900. He may well have been influenced by E.J. Lowe (d. 1900), the great horticulturalist and fern-grower, who lived at nearby Shirenewton Hall. Oakley was a great horticulturalist, specializing in fern-growing, and created a series of underground gardens to suit the needs of his ferns. Above ground his gardens are mainly informal, with specimen trees in lawns, and with much rockwork, mainly of natural stone. There are some formal elements, such as classical balustrading, a terrace, and a small rectangular sunken area in the southern part of the garden.

The main entrance is from the road on the west side of the house. To the north is a small lodge, built in about 1915, and lived in from then on by the head gardener Edward Pearce. The tree-lined drive passes over a balustraded bridge, and runs straight to the south front of the house, where it widens to a turning circle. A further, winding drive has been made by the present owner to an entrance on the south side of the garden. Originally there was also a drive from the north, past Dewstow Lodge (now the farmhouse) and the Rustic Lodge, a small square building built of rounded stones. The land to the north of Dewstow House is now in separate ownership and this drive has been blocked.

The gardens divide into two main areas, to the west and south of the house. To the west of the house is a formal terrace with stone walls on its W, N and E sides. The N wall has blank arcading, and a circular stone-built alcove at its E end. The low W wall has a circular 'turret' with a small alcove in it at its S end. In the SE corner of the terrace is the formal, balustraded entrance to the underground gardens, with steps leading down to a narrow passage lined with artificial rockwork, which leads to a large chamber to the north of the terrace. Half-way along the passage is a branch passage which leads to a blocked entrance flanked by classical pillars, which originally led to a further chamber (where there is now a swimming pool) and thence to the basement of the house. At the entrance to the chamber is a Gothic doorway and the original oak door. The chamber is top-lit, with an iron framework disguised as rockwork supporting glass glazing. Much of the glazing has now broken or has gone. The chamber consists of much artificial rockwork, made to appear like a limestone cave, with pillars, stalactites, pools at ground level, pools stacked in tiers, higher level pools, and niches in which plants (ferns) could be placed. There are some formal elements, such as balustrading, and the supporting walls on the north and south sides, are of coursed concrete blocks and are not disguised. Originally there were fountains and cascades from pool to pool.

At the north-west end of the chamber a passage leads to steps up to an arch into an open tunnel (originally closed), at the end of which are two blocked passages, one to the chamber to the west, and one to the demolished chamber to the east (where there is now a swimming pool).

To the west of the terrace is a winding stream ornamented with much rockwork and pools, which passes under the main drive. To the north it passes under a Gothic arch in a wall into a small 'gorge', with tiered rockwork on either side, and the stream running in small winding channels in the level artificial rockwork floor. In the east side is a small semi-circular pool. An arched entrance leads into the second underground garden. Just inside the entrance, on the right-hand side, is a caved-in passage into the underground garden to the east (there is another at the north end). Most of the floor is taken up with a naturalistic pool, with stone steps across it. There are pillars of rockwork, similar to those in the first garden, with niches for ferns, and at the north end is a waterfall, which can still be made to run. The chamber is top-lit, but the glazing has gone, leaving only the iron and reinforced concrete framework. The water for the gardens was carefully controlled, and there are various standpipes and water-cocks (some hidden in niches) for turning it on and off (also in other parts of the gardens where there is water). Only a very few ferns remain in these chambers, which were designed for fern-growing.

The greenhouses, in which Mr Oakley grew a great number of exotic plants as well as ferns, lay to the north of the house. They have now gone, and only the foundations of the main one remain.

To the south of the house is the second main area of the garden. This is a roughly triangular area, sloping gently to the south, of lawn, specimen trees, rockwork and pools. A small stream runs through rockwork at the north-eastern end, and then runs underground into the third main area of underground gardens, which lies in the eastern half of this area. It is approached from the north down steps, into a passage lined with artificial rockwork. In the floor of the passage is a narrow rill, which widens into a pool in the central chamber. There is no top lighting, only the occasional hole in the roof to let a small amount of light enter. Otherwise this area is completely dark (and is inhabited by bats). The passage emerges at the south end into a roughly circular rockwork area, with two pools in the artificial rock floor, and no roof. Chips in the rockwork sides expose the brickwork behind the surface. Steps lead up to the natural ground surface. In the southern end of this area are several naturalistic pools between which are small streams and cascades edged with rockwork. To the east of the largest pool is a levelled area backed by a stone revetment wall, in the centre of which are steps up to a small circular roofless summerhouse, built of stone. Next to the lowest pool is a small roofed building (? a changing room for swimmers), and a small pumping house, for pumping water back up to the top of the garden. Near the east edge of the garden is a sunken rectangular garden edged with drystone walling, reached by steps on the west side, with a small cross-shaped pool in the centre. On the western side of the area massive rocks have been arranged in tiers to look like natural rock outcrops.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Drives

The main entrance drive runs from the road to the west of the house straight to the south front of the house, where it widens to form a turning circle. It is tarmacked, as is the other drive, which is a new one running from the south side of the garden to the main drive.

Terrace

To the west of the house is a levelled terrace, formerly a lawn tennis court, now lawn. Around the W, N and E sides is a raised walk, also lawn.

Sunken garden

South-east of the house, near the eastern boundary of the garden, is a square sunken level grass area surrounded with low drystone walls. In the centre is a small cross-shaped pool surrounded with flagstones.

Water and rockwork (above ground)

There is much rockwork, both natural and artificial, all over the garden (see also underground gardens).

Either side of the main entrance are large slabs of real rock, and there is rockwork around the bases of some of the trees lining the drive. The drive to the east of the house, leading to the outbuildings, is also lined with (real) rockwork, as are the flowerbeds next to it.

West of the house a small stream emerges from the underground gardens, and winds southwards through several pools (and under the drive). The stream and pools are flanked by much rockwork (real), and are lined with cement. North of the underground gardens the stream comes from a pond, to the east of the roofless tunnel.

To the east of the house is a small circular cement-lined pool, with real upright stones around it.

At the southern end of the garden is an area of pools and rockwork. Along the western boundary is a bank of massive slabs of red sandstone in tiers, made to look like natural beds of stone. To the east is an area of rockwork, winding paths, streams, and pools. The largest has an irregular outline and a central square island of rockwork (formerly with a fountain).

BUILT COMPONENTS

Lodges, gates and fencing

To the north of the main entrance is a small single-storey lodge (formerly the head-gardener's house), built in about 1915. It has been modernized and extended in the last 20 years. Narrow curving stone steps flanked by low walls topped with rockwork lead up to it. The entrance is flanked by curving walls of dressed stone and square gate piers in similar style. A little way down the drive are a pair of iron gates flanked by square gate piers in bands of undressed stone, which are probably later than the outer gates.

The former Dewstow Lodge, on the road to the north of the house, is now a farmhouse. It is a two-storey stone building in simple vernacular style, with a Gothic window on its north side (facing the road). To the east is a simple entrance with stone walls on either side.

Between Dewstow Lodge and Dewstow House stands the Rustic Lodge. This is a small square single-storey building with a pitched roof and walls of rounded stones. It is probably late 19th-century in date.

The gate piers and gates at the southern entrance are modern.

The garden is surrounded with iron fencing.

Bridge

Half-way along the main drive is a single-arched stone bridge with classical balustrading on either side.

The terrace

The terrace is surrounded on all but the S side with walling. Along the N side is a high stone wall of a pale golden-coloured dressed stone, with an eight-arch blind arcade, the easternmost arch being a doorway. At both ends are semi-circular alcoves set into the corners, with round arches under gabled tops. Stone steps flanked by low parapet walls lead down to the former tennis court from the middle of the raised walk. Along the W side of the terrace is a low revetment wall, with a small circular 'turret' at the S end. This is built of coursed undressed blocks, has a conical roof with rockwork around the base, a square alcove on the NE side, and has rockwork in front of it. In the south-east corner of the terrace is the entrance to the main underground garden. This consists of steps of flagstones down to a wide doorway with a central stone classical column. Above this is a short stretch of balustrading (similar to that on the bridge) with piers and ball finials at the ends. South of the steps the entrance is extended by flanking balustrading and flared ends of circular piers topped by ball finials.

The underground gardens

There are three areas of underground gardens, two to the west of the house, and one to the south-east. The first two were originally linked, but the interlinking passages are now blocked. There was originally a further area, to the north of the house (where the swimming pool now is), but access to this is now blocked.

The westernmost area is reached through a Gothic archway in a wall running westwards from the N side of the terrace. This leads to a small enclosed area of rockwork, with a stream running in artificial winding rills in the artificial stone floor. The sides are of tiered artificial rockwork, and in the W side is a standpipe for the control of the water flow. At the foot of the E side is a small semi-circular pool. At the N end is an arched entrance to the underground garden chamber. On the right-hand side are two caved-in passageways which originally led to the next underground area to the east. The chamber is top-lit, with glazing supported on iron bars (glazing now gone), and reinforced concrete. Most of the floor area is taken up with a naturalistic pool, with stone steps across it leading to paths round the edge, and up to a higher level on the W side. The sides of the chamber are all naturalistic artificial rockwork, and in the interior are several irregular rockwork pillars. Small planting niches occur in both walls and pillars, and ferns are still growing in a few. There was originally a waterfall at the north end.

The second area of underground gardens is reached from a grand classical entrance at the east end of the terrace (see above). Steps lead down to a narrow passage, with small holes in the ceiling for (very dim) light. On the right-hand side is a side passage leading to a blocked entrance flanked by classical pillars, which led to the grotto (gone) where the swimming pool now is, and via this to the basement of the house. Further along is another blocked side entrance. The passage is straight, but with artificial rockwork jutting out from the east side. At the end is a Gothic doorway and original oak door. This doorway leads into the east end of the main chamber, which is a roughly rectangular sunken area behind the N wall of the terrace. It is roofed with glass (some broken), the supports (both horizontal and vertical) of which are heavily disguised with artificial rockwork, including stalactites. The N, S and W walls are of unadorned concrete, as in the passages, the surface of which is made to look like coursed stone blocks. Throughout the chamber is a profusion of artificial rockwork, forming beds, basins, pillars, and naturalistic pools. The floor is mostly taken up with pools, with stepping stones across them. At the E end is a raised pool with a fountain, and there is a smaller one in the centre of the main pool. At the W end there are concrete steps up to a

raised pool, in one corner of which is a further, higher pool. Along the N side is a raised flowerbed, pool and low straight wall with a stone coping, balustrading and two square stone piers (another similar one at the top of the steps at the W end). In the NW corner is an exit to a wide, regular-sided below-ground passage (open to the sky). There is rockwork on top of the concrete sides, and a water channel in the floor. At the N end are steps up to an arched entrance to a further tunnel, which branches (right to the vanished grotto, curving left to the westernmost area). Both branches are now blocked.

The third area of underground gardens lies to the SE of the house, in the lower garden area. The whole is constructed of artificial stone. At its N end curving concrete steps lead down to two artificial stone arched entrances. The interior is completely dark, except for pin-pricks of light let in through small holes in the ceilings. The two narrow passages join and lead to several chambers, one of which has a pool in the floor. The floor is also of artificial stone, indented with winding rills. At the S end the passage emerges into a sunken area open to the sky. This also is of artificial stone (brickwork behind showing in several places), with piers and a level floor in which are two naturalistic pools. Steps lead up to the natural ground surface.

Buildings in the south part of the garden

As well as the underground gardens there are several other built features in the south part of the garden. A small circular pillar of artificial stone stands on a natural rock at the N end of the revetment wall above the main pool. Above the centre of the wall, reached by steps, is a small gazebo of similar stonework. It has a semi-circular wall with three small rectangular windows in it on the E side, two circular piers on the W side. The floor is paved, and there is no roof.

At the S end of the garden, next to a small pool, is a small square single-storey rendered building with a tile roof, with one small window, and a doorway with a dressed stone surround on the S side (? a changing room for swimming). Above the southernmost pool is a small brick building, with a real rockwork entrance, in which the pump for pumping water back up to the top of the garden was housed (now gone).

ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTS

Just to the E of the house is a large hexagonal stone planter on a carved stone base, ornamented with elaborate carved and inlaid astrological themes (signs of the zodiac, animals, fish etc.). Much of the inlay, which was of coloured stones, has gone. It is not known if this was a feature of the garden when Henry Oakley lived here.

PLANTED COMPONENTS

The planting of the garden is largely lawn, rough grass and specimen trees.

The main drive is flanked by horse chestnuts, and in the field to the N are large wellingtonias and other conifers. The W side of the public road to the W of the garden is lined with large mature pine trees. There is a large cedar tree to the W of the terrace, which is largely laid out to lawn. The entrance to the westernmost underground garden is flanked by evergreen shrubs, and within the garden there are a few ferns. In the chamber of the main underground chamber there are a few ferns, irises and other water-loving plants.

The southern part of the gardens is largely rough grass with mature specimen trees, both coniferous and deciduous, including fine cedars and copper beeches.

There are some mature ornamental trees in the field to the E of the garden, including a cedar, a row of horse chestnuts, and a clump of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees.

Reconstructions of original planted features

None

Special collections of garden plants

None (but formerly ferns)

Documented living plants

None

Other (including elements of nature conservation interest)

The underground garden to the SE of the house has bats living in it.

ESSENTIAL SETTING AND VIEWS BEYOND THE SITE

Essential setting: open fields to the E (being converted to golf course) and S of the garden.

Views: S from house (A on map) across the coastal plain to the Bristol Channel and beyond.

ANY SPECIAL FEATURES

None

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

Structural components: most

Built components: most

Architectural ornaments: most

Planted components: some

UTILITARIAN GARDENS

NAME Hot houses

Grid ref ST 466889

Date/style Early 20th-century/utilitarian

DESCRIPTION

There is very little left of Henry Oakley's hot houses. These lay to the N of the house, and were divided into different sections for heat and humidity, including one section for ferns, and another for cactuses. It is assumed that these hot houses were built by Oakley in the late 19th or early 20th century. All that is left are a flight of steps and a curving wall at the S end of what was a long N-S hot house.

SOURCES

Secondary

W.C. Winter, *Impressions and Recollections of Childhood, 1886-1987* (1987).