

BODNANT

Ref No PGW (Gd) 5 (CON)

OS Map 116

Grid Ref SH 799 722

Former County Gwynedd

Unitary Authority Conwy

Community Council Eglwysbach

Designations Listed buildings: Pin Mill Grade II*, terrace walls and steps, mausoleum and Furnace Mill all Grade II.

Site Evaluation **Grade I**

Primary reasons for grading An outstanding garden in an extremely picturesque position and the best known garden in north Wales. It was begun by Henry Pochin and developed by the 2nd Lord Aberconway, who designed and laid out the formal terraces in 1905-14; the other major element of the garden is the Dell, based on Pochin's original plantings around a stream and artificial ponds. There are two major garden buildings, several other features and important collections of plants, including many hybrids, especially of rhododendrons, raised at Bodnant.

Type of Site Formal terraced gardens with views; woodland and water garden; rockeries; small area of parkland; detailed layout with many features, and enormous range of plants including many exotic and half-hardy varieties.

Main Phases of Construction Late eighteenth century; nineteenth century; 1905-14.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Bodnant is situated on the east side of the Conwy valley, with magnificent views westwards from the house and garden over the valley and beyond to Snowdonia. The house, which is sited in the north-eastern part of the garden, looking out over the terraces to the west and with most of the garden to the south, was originally built by Col. Forbes in 1792, at a small distance from the original house (Old Bodnod) because of the better view. The house was bought by Henry Pochin, a wealthy industrial chemist, in 1874. Following this it was enlarged, re-faced with blue granite, and had the sash windows replaced by casements with sandstone mullions. Pochin also changed the main approach from south to north. Apart from the growth of the climbing plants which clothe the walls, many planted by Pochin, it has remained basically unchanged since.

The conservatory, attached to the south-east corner of the house, was built for Pochin by Messenger & Co. in 1882. The adjacent fernery was in place and planted by 1883 so was probably built at the same time. The conservatory is of typical Victorian design, white-painted wood with decorative wrought ironwork along the ridge, also painted white. An engraving of 1883 shows the conservatory to have a porch on the south side and the fernery double doors, but both these features have now gone.

The park is now of very much less importance than the garden, some of it having been turned into garden over the years. The remnant to the south (the Old Park) retains some trees probably planted in c. 1792. These are mostly oak and mostly planted where the land rises into hillocks. It has been extensively planted with narcissi, and its function now is to provide a pleasant view beyond the garden to the south. It is managed as part of the garden.

Other areas to the north of the house, between the two drives, also have the character of parkland, with scattered hardwood trees, mostly oak, and a small copse of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees on top of a rise. There are views across this from some parts of the garden, but it is now treated as farmland. Other similar areas in the near parts of the estate are not visible from the garden.

There are two drives to the house, one from the junction of the main Betws-y-Coed to Conwy road and the Eglwysbach road to the north, and the other off the main road further on, approaching the house from the north-west. Both run through plantations of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees, with underplantings of shrubs, which are probably contemporary with the drives. There is also a short access route from the Eglwysbach road next to the kitchen garden.

The drives date from after the main Betws-y-Coed to Conwy road was re-routed. The old route is shown on Ordnance Survey maps of 1840-41 and 1890 (surveyed some years before), but the new route is shown on the 1913 map. The old road made a sharp zig-zag, bringing it very close to the house, and the main entrance to the house was from the south-east. What is now the gardener's cottage was the lodge.

When the road was straightened, the zig-zag was abandoned, and was partly used in making the new drives and partly removed. The north-west drive follows the first part of the zig-zag to start with, but then takes a gentle curve instead of continuing straight. The old road between this point and the sharp corner has been taken up, but the first part of the return after the bend survives as a track. North-east of the entirely new north drive it has also been removed.

The north drive takes the longest possible route out to the road, and, like the north-west drive, curves gently. The lodge at the north gate is of stone and black-and-white timbering, that at the west gate stone. One sandstone gate pier survives by the north lodge, but the north-west drive has an elaborate entrance with double gate piers, a short length of sandstone walling with piers, iron railings and gates, painted black. Both drives have plantings of mixed trees and shrubs on both sides for most of their length, and both have lodges. The short drive from the east has

also been changed, so as to curve round the new kitchen garden instead of running straight across its site. The entrance has sandstone gateposts with wrought iron gates; the posts are topped with urns similar to the ones on the pergola on the Rose Terrace, which were copied from the Ritz Hotel in London. All the drives are surfaced with tarmac. The drive from the south-east had been removed by the time an engraving was made of the south front of the house in 1883, so presumably the new drives had been made by this time.

A stone ha-ha forms the boundary between the Old Park and the Front Lawn, continuing eastwards and southwards, but ending to the west at an iron fence near the Round Garden. It was evidently constructed at some time after 1883 as the engraving of that date shows a wooden fence in its place.

Although the garden's main development was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it could not have developed in the same way without the framework which was already in place. Trees planted by the builder of the house, Col. Forbes, from 1792 onwards, were already mature when Henry Pochin bought the house in 1874. These were oak, sweet chestnut and, especially, beech, which had been little planted in North Wales before this time. Pochin was able to indulge his interest in exotic conifers with some shelter already established, and did not need to plant timber on the lawns around the house. Nevertheless, while he concentrated on planting the Pinetum in the Dell (as the steep valley of the Hiraethlyn stream is known), he engaged Edward Milner's firm to lay out the grounds around the house. He also planted the two cedars which are now on the Lily Terrace, in 1875.

Milner's design was uncomplicated, with terraces on the south and west sides of the house, from which a rather steep grass bank descended to the lawns, inconveniently without steps. There were formal beds and informal shrubberies on the sloping lawn to the west. The pierced wall which runs off to the south from just east of the conservatory was probably part of the design; this follows the line of the west wall of the old kitchen garden, which was moved probably in the early 1880s. In an engraving of 1883, a round garden is shown beyond the end of this, up a few steps, which must be on or very near the site of the present Round Garden.

It is likely that all these changes were made in the late 1870s and early 1880s. The vine houses were built in about 1876, either on the north wall of the old kitchen garden or on a new wall which replaced it - the south wall of the new kitchen garden. The rest of the range was probably built at the same time, and the conservatory, built in 1882, was probably one of the last major elements of the improvements. Once the kitchen garden had been moved, the way would have been clear for the pierced wall to be erected along the line of its old west wall. The drive from the south-east must have been moved by the time the round garden was made, so the new drives to north and north-west were presumably in place before 1883. Clearly the straightening of the Betws-Conwy road was crucial to the whole scheme.

Meanwhile, in 1876, Pochin had planted the first conifers on the east bank of the stream in the Dell. These included *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauc', *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Lobbii' and (in 1877) *Tsuga heterophylla*. The trees on the west bank were mainly planted in 1886 (e.g. *Sequoia sempervirens*, *Tsuga mertensiana*, *Sequoiadendron giganteum* 'Pendulum'), but planting

dates are recorded during the intervening decade (*Abies veitchii* 1879, *Cedrus deodora* 1881, etc.) as well. By 1883 the laburnum arcade had been made, there was a 'small geometric flower garden' (possibly the Round Garden), rockeries had been created in the Dell and the mausoleum (called 'The Poem') had just been built. Many shrubs and heathers had been planted in the Dell, and an elaborate wooden bridge crossed the Mill Pool above the waterfall, in the same position as the modern one. In 1888 another lake with an artificial island is mentioned at the southern end of the Dell, and there was a double herbaceous border near The Poem, a 100-ft rose bower and a rosery with several large beds. By 1892 the garden was already receiving many visitors.

Pochin died in 1895 and left the estate to his daughter, Lady Aberconway. Lord Aberconway was not much interested in gardening and Lady Aberconway went into partnership with her son, Henry Duncan McLaren, instead, she supplying advice, manpower and money, and he, though very young at the time, thinking up ideas, making designs, and carrying out the work.

McLaren's major project was the creation of the five magnificent terraces to the west of the house, which not only make an interesting and beautiful feature out of a fairly steep slope, but also make the most of the view and provide sheltered conditions for growing many somewhat tender plants. This scheme was conceived in 1903, carried out between 1905 and 1914 (without damage to the two cedars planted on the slope in 1875), and improved upon later by the addition of a baroque fountain to the Croquet Terrace and the Pin Mill to the Canal Terrace.

The Dell continued to be planted and acquired a more woodland character as the trees grew; plantings were altered accordingly. From about 1909 it was developed as a woodland garden along the lines advocated by William Robinson.

Henry Duncan McLaren's other great contribution to the garden was the introduction of rhododendrons. Before 1908 very few had been grown, but in that year some new Chinese varieties from seed collected in 1900 became available, and he decided to try them. Some of the first, with Himalayan varieties, were planted in the Quarry Garden, an area at the top of the valley of a tributary of the Hiraethlyn, where there had formerly been a small quarry. They did well there, and McLaren began to hybridise, planting masses of the species and hybrids he found most successful. He continued to develop and plant new varieties all his life.

The two major components of the garden are therefore the Dell, a Pinetum in a beautifully natural setting, with water, rockeries, and a huge variety of trees and shrubs, created mainly by Henry Pochin; and the formal terraces, bringing the lovely view of the Conwy valley into the garden and providing a sheltered home for a wide range of more demanding shrubs and climbers, created by his grandson. Although these two areas are completely different in character, they are brought together successfully by the intermediate area of lawns, shrub borders and dotted trees, which also have many little separate features (the Round Garden, Rosemary Garden, mausoleum, two pools and so on), which mix formal elements with a less structured framework.

The five terraces created in 1905-14 descend from Milner's terrace on the west of the house. These are bounded by walls of grey granite. The original steps from the top were opposite the

south-west corner of the house and descended straight across the top new terrace, the Rose Terrace, on to the Croquet Terrace below. These were, however, altered later when McLaren obtained the baroque fountain which (much eroded) is now in place in the centre of the wall of the Croquet Terrace. The top flight now leads only on to the Rose Terrace, and two new flights sweep round either side of the fountain down to the Croquet Terrace.

The Rose Terrace is paved, with rectangular island beds each planted with a single variety of rose. The view along the central path terminates on the south with a statue of Priapus. The Croquet Terrace has a much higher, curving back wall, with the fountain in the centre, and is lawned; it has also been called the Bowling Green Terrace.

Steps down from this terrace at each end turn at right angles on to the lawn of the Lily Terrace. Here a large rectangular pool with a semicircular extension to the west occupies most of the space between the two 120-year-old cedars. The edge of the pool is paved, as is that of a narrow canal carrying water to it from a second small pool in the middle of the back wall. This wall has buttresses at intervals which provide extra shelter for particularly delicate shrubs. There is a brick path along each side, and an arched entrance opening on to each path, from north and south sides respectively.

There is a curving yew hedge along the front of the terrace, the shape of which echoes that of the pool, and beyond this a grass walk. The straight ends of the walk are stone-paved, and lead down into two flights of steps, curving round either side of the semicircular extension of the terrace and descending to the Lower Rose Terrace below. Over the steps, and running east-west at either end of this terrace, are trellis-work pergolas, decorated with urns. A photograph taken in 1928 shows that at that time the east-west pergolas had not yet been erected, nor were there any urns on the upper level of the central pergola.

The paths of the Lower Rose Terrace are brick, and again there are rectangular rose beds with single varieties of rose. At either side, tucked in beside the semicircular extension of the terrace above, is a small lawn with borders, up a few steps. The northern such area contains tree paeonies, and the southern is given over to white flowers.

In the centre of the Lower Rose Terrace its width is reduced to almost just that of the main north-south path; a semicircular inset from the Canal Terrace below curves back towards the extension of the Lily Terrace above. In the centre of this is a shallow flight of steps down to the Canal Terrace, and there are also steps at either end of the Lower Rose Terrace.

The Canal Terrace is the longest, and is lawned, with a canal (also called the swimming pool, and used by Sir Bernard Fryberg for practice for his channel swim) down the centre. The western boundary is a clipped yew hedge, and within this is a long herbaceous border. At the south end is the Pin Mill, an early eighteenth-century building probably originally intended as a garden house or lodge, but rescued by McLaren from decay and use as a hide store in a tannery in Gloucestershire. At the north end is a clipped yew theatre, with stage, wings and changing-room, flanked by term statues, but designed more for effect than for use, although plays are very occasionally staged.

The whole series of terraces is luxuriantly planted, in particular with climbers and shrubs which appreciate the warmth and shelter of the walls. Climbing plants are often planted at the top of walls and trained downwards, and many of the walls have planting holes for small wall plants. The collection of plants on the terraces alone is exceptional.

There are two formal pools elsewhere in the gardens, in addition to those on the terraces. One, on the Top or East Lawn, is a simple circular pool with paved surround, and a circular border of small shrubs. It seems to be in exactly the same place as a circular feature shown on old maps in the old kitchen garden, which may have been a dipping pool, and it is possibly a survivor from this previous layout, formalised to fit in with the new.

The other pool, to the south of the house, is deeply terraced into the slope at the back and thus rather shady. It is oval, perhaps 12 m long, with an edging of decorative terracotta tiles and a brick path surrounding it. Between the path and the water is a border planted with *Rhododendron williamsianum*, recently replanted. Canadian pondweed, *Aponogeton distachyus*, flourishes in the sheltered pond, and nineteenth-century commentators mentioned its scent and the fact that it flowered for nine months of the year. It seems likely therefore that this pond was an early development, though F. C. Puddle, the former head gardener, writing in 1950, calls it 'an old bathing-pool'. A pool a little lower down is shown on the 1889 Ordnance Survey map (surveyed earlier), which could of course have been the original home of the pondweed; but in 1892 *two* pieces of water were mentioned, which recalls the modern layout, as there is an informal pond just below.

More than one part of the garden has been described as a rockery or rock garden at different times, and there certainly are loose arrangements of rocks in many of the plantings, especially of rhododendrons. Round the mausoleum heathers and other shrubs have been planted on the natural rocks and those added to support the mausoleum and add to the 'picturesqueness' of its surroundings. However, by now most of these areas have become completely overshadowed by the plants growing in them, and what is now known as the rockery occupies the valley of the little spring which feeds the pool mentioned above. The water has been artificially dammed into pools, made into tiny waterfalls and encouraged to flow down the face of rocks. The planting is of smaller rhododendrons and azaleas on the rocks, with skunk cabbage, primulas and other waterside plants next to the stream.

The mausoleum is approached from below via the surrounding rockery mentioned, and from the meadow above by a completely contrasting formal arrangement. A grass path leads into a flight of steps, flanked by low walls with urns, which in turn leads into a garden, defined by the same low walls, surrounding the crossing of this path and the one coming up from below and heading back towards the house. Beyond this are three more flights of steps, all with low walling at the sides, leaving the small garden and going on down to the entrance to the mausoleum. The whole feature is planted with shrubs.

The Round Garden may be one of the earliest features in the garden, dating perhaps from about 1880. At that time it had no fountain, and probably no pool, and seems, from an engraving, to

have been planted with carpeting plants and dwarf conifers. It now has a mixed planting of small shrubs, including many daphnes. There are large camellias either side of the entrance to each of the four narrow flagged paths which quarter the garden (two, however, are missing), and the whole is surrounded with shrub beds. The stone fountain, with dolphins, is large and imposing in relation to the garden. It is set in a pool with a stone surround.

A small circular garden just above the break of slope at the top of the Dell, known as the 'Rosemary Garden', has a viewpoint with a camellia hedge and a seat at its western edge. A path crosses the centre, east to west. The circle is delineated by a rosemary hedge, and is planted with a variety of woodland plants. It is approached from above by steps flanked with the typical flat-topped low walls. The rosemary hedge is newly planted, replacing a yew hedge, and the name has been changed accordingly.

The South or Front Lawn extends from the terrace by the house right to the ha-ha bounding the Old Park, narrowing between the terraced oval pool and the beds and borders surrounding the Round Garden. It has herbaceous borders backing the terrace, along the east side and along the balustrade of the terrace wall above the pool. A wide flight of stone steps leading down from the house terrace dates from after 1883, as does the terrace wall itself and the stone seats beside the steps.

The surface of the lawn is very uneven close to the house, which may be in part due to the removal of trees; but none are shown here on the 1883 engraving. Some of the unevenness was probably caused by the taking up of the old drive from the south-east, which would have crossed this area. The lawn leads down to the west through a group of Col. Forbes' beech trees towards the rockery and dell, and the Priapus statue stands on it, before the entrance to the Rose Terrace. This is therefore a key area in linking the formal and 'wild' elements of the garden.

The whole garden is very well served by paths. Those on the terraces are obviously integral to their design, and the two paths either side of the stream in the Dell have been there since Pochin's day, as has the one climbing up by the mausoleum and coming back above the Dell towards the house. Many others have been added in recent years for the convenience of visitors, mostly gravel surfaced, but in the meadow areas, of mown grass. Overall they form an intricate system serving almost every corner of the garden.

Pochin reinforced the bed of the Hiraethlyn before doing anything else in the Dell, because in winter it can carry a great deal of rough water and be extremely destructive. Many decorative alterations to its natural course have also been made. The most significant is the large, vertical waterfall at the outflow from the Mill Pool, which is an important feature both seen from above, and looking back up the Dell. There are also two weirs higher up the Dell, near the larger pool at the south end, numerous rapids, stepping stones and rustic bridges. Very little of the course of the stream remains in its natural state, and yet the overall effect is of great naturalness.

The tributary streams have received similar treatment, with similar effect. That in the Rockery has been mentioned, and the other, in the Quarry Garden and Yew Dell, which runs

back to the east from near the mausoleum, has also had its bed much reinforced and some extra rocks added to make rapids and small falls. It too is crossed by many bridges.

The Mill Pool pre-dates the garden, giving rise to a mill-race which first served a blast furnace on the banks of the Conwy, then the flour mill at the north end of the Dell, and more recently the estate sawmill just beyond this. The pool has, however, been enlarged. Another pool at the southern end of the Dell was probably created as a garden feature. It contains an artificial island and has a boathouse.

To the north of the Lower Rose Terrace is an area of informal terracing and raised borders with rubble dry-stone walls. This is planted with palms, hellebores and plants with narrow, spiky leaves, giving an impression of aridity.

Numerous internal and external views can be obtained from all over the garden, but there are two specially constructed view points on the top path above the Dell. One is close to the mausoleum, to the north, and consists of a circular area surrounding a seat encircling an oak tree, with a low informal stone wall around it. The other is at the western edge of the Rosemary Garden, and takes the form of a gravelled area with a seat behind a 'C'-shaped low wall covered with clipped camellias. Just below, on the steep slope of the Dell, two more seats are reached by short side paths from the steps.

When Henry Pochin bought Bodnant in 1874 the kitchen garden was on the south side of what is now its south wall, and was shown still in that position on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map published in 1889. This map was surveyed in 1875 and 1888 and it is clear that Bodnant falls into the area surveyed at the earlier date. The map shows a rectangular garden divided by paths into six areas, planted with fruit trees and with two small glasshouses and a shed. Where the two main paths crossed was a small circular feature, in all likelihood a dipping pool, and as this seems to be in the exact position of the small pond on the top lawn, this may well have been developed from it.

Much on this map, at Bodnant, was already out of date by the time it was published, and it is likely that the new kitchen garden behind the house was built in the early 1880s. An account in 1884 mentions the large range of glasshouses built from 1876, and seems to indicate that at that time the kitchen garden was where it is now, that is, on the other side of the wall, to the north. There is visible evidence that the walls were later raised, and the 1884 account mentions a 'peach wall' 9 ft (less than 3 m) high, whereas now the walls are higher than this, up to 5.5 m. The stone is the same blue-grey granite as the house.

Late nineteenth-century descriptions list all the fruit grown in great detail; of particular interest is the fact that apples were grown successfully on trees trained along the roofs of buildings, the trunks sometimes growing in front of the windows.

The kitchen garden is now occupied by the plant sales area, largely consisting of an enormous and very new glasshouse-cum-shop. A range of buildings against the inside of the south wall may at least in part remain from the last century, and one pine tree may pre-date the

construction of the walls. There is a wide gateway in the west wall leading into the yard behind the house, two gates through the south wall (one through the range of buildings) and two entrances directly into the garden from the Eglwysbach road. One of these is probably recent, made for garden visitors.

The range of glasshouses outside the south wall eventually became unsafe and had to be demolished, in about 1980. A wide herbaceous border now occupies the site.

The present head gardener is the third generation of the Puddle family to hold this position, and there is no doubt that the Puddles have been of great importance to Bodnant, not only for their contribution to the design and upkeep of the garden, but particularly in the breeding and development of new 'Bodnant' hybrids, a process which is still continuing.

Sources

Primary

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