

TAN-YR-ALLT

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 18 (GWY)
OS Map	124
Grid Ref	SH 566 405
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Gwynedd
Community Council	Porthmadog
Designations	Listed buildings: house Grade II*, lodge Grade II; SSSI
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading House and grounds designed by William Madocks as his own home, laid out in the 'romantic' manner; exceptional view; trees contemporary with laying out of site around 1800; well-preserved kitchen garden.

Type of Site Wooded park, ornamental garden with good trees, kitchen garden, view.

Main Phases of Construction c. 1800

SITE DESCRIPTION

Tan-yr-Allt, the first Regency house in north Wales, is a long, low, two-storey building, stone-built with a low-pitched slate roof and painted white, with a verandah all along the south front, returning round the east side. It is in two blocks, one set further back than the other. Perched on a steep hillside looking south over Porthmadog and Traeth Mawr, it has a view down to Harlech and beyond. The long, narrow shape of the house is clearly a necessity, to fit it into the site, but even so the plot has been partly cut out of the cliff, leaving a sheer rock face as high as the house immediately behind it. One can see the house, surrounded by its woods, from miles away in several directions.

Tan-yr-Allt was the home of William Madocks, the philanthropist, romantic and practical improver responsible for building the Cob at Porthmadog and draining the estuary, and building the town of Tremadog. He built the house in about 1800, incorporating an existing cottage which faced the hillside, and also laid out the gardens and enhanced the natural woods around. Subsequently the house belonged to the Greaves family, slate barons of Blaenau Ffestiniog and owners of nearby Wern, who were still in residence in 1921, and in 1985 it was bought by the Steiner School.

Madocks was the centre of a circle of philosophers and thinkers which included several literary figures. The poet Shelley was a close friend and lived at Tan-yr-Allt between 1812 and 1816, at an agreed rent of £100 p. a. which he never paid. During his time in the house he wrote *Queen Mab*. He was also involved with Madocks in raising the money for the Cob and the draining work at Porthmadog, and there is a memorial to him in the garden. Sheridan also visited Tan-yr-Allt, as did Thomas Love Peacock, who drew on the house, grounds and inhabitants for his satirical novel *Headlong Hall*.

A single-storey stone building with loft, the stables are on the south side of the west drive. The rear wall forms part of the north wall of the kitchen garden. There is a small tack room on the east end. The original large central doorway under a massive stone lintel has been filled with a door and window and some wooden panelling.

There is a small shed on the opposite side of the road from the stables, and there may once have been another west of this as there is a small area cut back into the slope. The dog kennels have gone and been replaced by a modern wooden building, but the platform on which they stood remains. It is on the south edge of the west drive, just east of the stables, and is revetted on the lower side by a massively-built wall almost 2 m high. The dog cemetery is just below this. A rather oddly-shaped stone outbuilding, now lavatories, is situated just to the west of the house and gardener's cottage. It is very small and was probably a store. The gardener's tiny stone-built cottage is very close to the house, off the south-west corner. It is single-storey, with a door in the centre of the south side and a small window in the east gable.

There is only a small area of parkland to the south of the house, at the foot of the slope, but a large expanse of semi-natural woodland on the steep, craggy slope to the north of the house is part of the designed landscape. The park is contemporary with the house, dating from the early years of the nineteenth century.

The woods above the house must have been in existence when Madocks acquired the site, consisting mostly of sessile oak. Madocks added other kinds of trees, taking great care to see that they thrived - he was particularly fond of beech, and made special pockets of chalky clay for them amongst the crags. Many superb beech trees planted by him survive, and are one of the best features of park and garden.

The woods retain their semi-natural character, and the trees within them regenerate naturally. The woodland is managed light-handedly, concentrating on removing dead wood and ensuring safety.

There is a field south of the house, between it and the road, which is an area of former parkland. It slopes to the south, and has scattered immature trees; part has now been planted with young fruit trees.

The elevated site necessitates long drives, which climb from east and west. The east drive retains many good trees, and has a lodge, also designed by Madocks, at the entrance. Just to the east of the house it crosses a stream, the naturally steep course of which has been altered by

the addition of pools and waterfalls, creating both sights and sounds to be appreciated from the drive.

The gardens were laid out around the time the house was built, by Madocks. There is little formal structure, the important elements being the view, trees, and the kitchen garden. The garden and woods continued to be cared for by subsequent owners and there are flourishing trees of all ages. The original informal layout does not seem to have been much altered.

In front of the house, which stands on a narrow shelf in the hillside with its garden below and wooded park above, is a large, sloping lawn from where wide views over Porthmadog and its surroundings and down to Harlech can be obtained. This view was obviously one of the chief reasons for selection of this site, which is in many ways inconvenient. At the foot of the lawn is a small formal pond which once had a cherub fountain, and the grass slope is surrounded by trees. A level lawn to the east also enjoys the view, and from here one can hear the pleasant sound of a stream which runs down through the woods nearby. Varieties of rhododendron planted round this area flower successively, giving colour from early spring to midsummer.

Plantations of trees within the garden area extend away to the east and south-west from the house, and contain a good mixture of species, both trees and underplantings. William Madocks was a tree enthusiast, and was particularly fond of beeches; there are numerous specimens planted by him which have now reached a great size, and these constitute one of the main features of the property.

The kitchen garden was an important element of the garden, occupying as it does much of the available space. It clearly had a partly ornamental function, with plantings of decorative trees and shrubs, and may also have contained flower borders, as at present. It has suffered a period of neglect, but is now being restored and used by staff and pupils at the school.

The kitchen garden is large, sub-rectangular and walled. It was laid out by Madocks at the same time as the rest of the garden, some time after 1800. The garden covers over a third of an acre, sloping down quite steeply from north to south. The south end is an irregular, curved shape, and may be the result of enlarging the garden at some point as there is a change from brick to stone in the west wall; the east wall however is stone throughout.

More than half of the length of the north wall, to the east, is formed by the back wall of the stables. Beyond this is a stretch of stone wall about 3 m high which links the building with a large tank in the north-west corner of the garden; the wall continues behind this but in a different, less neat, style and with evidence of repairs. There was at one time a small building on the outside of the wall here, which has been demolished, but the doorway leading to it through the wall remains, with a modern wooden door.

The tank is very large, with stone walls lined with brick, and rendered. The walls are about 0.8 m thick, and appear to be hollow. It is known as the 'swimming pool' and is certainly large enough for swimming, with a 'stepped' interior giving a less deep half way level, and wooden steps down to this level. The deeper part is perhaps 1.5 m deep. However, its position in the

kitchen garden suggests that it originally, or also, had a function as a source of water for the garden. Slate steps lead up to it on the east side. The west garden wall is not part of the structure of the tank and would have been taller, but it has been damaged in this corner. Some pipework is visible on the outside at the base of the south wall of the tank.

The west wall is hand-made brick on stone foundations, with a rough slate coping, about 2.3 m high in the north, but becoming lower towards the south; there is a change in height just south of the top door in the west wall. The height of the stone base also increases towards the south, so that just before the change to all-stone construction, it is about half the height of the wall. The actual vertical join between the brick and stone parts of the wall is obscured by ivy on one side and a hen-house on the other, but the stone wall continues around the bottom curve at the same height. A joint was not observed on the east either, and on this side the wall is dry-stone right to the north-east corner, with a rough flattish stone coping. It has partly collapsed in places.

There are doorways near the northern edge of the garden in east and west walls, opposite each other, with pointed arches over; these are set in sections of mortared stone wall thicker than the dry-stone and brick of the rest of the walls. They both contain green-painted wrought iron gates, in different designs, with sticks woven through to exclude chickens and rabbits. There is also a doorway half way down the east side of the upper, rectangular, part of the garden, but not on the west. This also has a wrought iron gate, but is disused, and completely overgrown with wistaria. There is a square-headed doorway with a stone lintel and wooden door towards the bottom of the garden on the west, through the stone part of the wall.

No buildings of historic interest remain within the garden and none are shown on the 1901 and 1918 maps except for a tiny greenhouse, in a different place on each map. There is a tradition that the garden used to contain orchid houses, so perhaps that was the function of the small greenhouses. The one shown on the later map, however, seems to be in the position of one of the two surviving (but now glassless) brick frames south of the top cross-path on the west side, and could be this. There are more frames, and a small brick-paved area, south of a row of yews on the east side of the garden.

Paths cross between the two gates near the north end of the garden, and also run down either side and across the bottom. Two more paths cross in the middle, dividing the top, rectangular, part of the garden into quadrants. There are no visible paths in the southern area. Some of the gravel surface of these paths survives, although they are mostly grassed over, and the quadrants and borders are edged with slate and wood, probably recent.

There are some survivals of original or early plantings in the garden, despite a period of neglect before it came into the hands of the school. Several of these are ornamental, showing that the garden then, as now, had a partly decorative function. The wide borders down each side could have been used for flowers from the start, with fruit trees on the walls behind. There are pear trees against the east wall, at least one of which is an old tree.

In the area above the top east-west path there are two Irish yews, a golden yew, a fig and also

a ginkgo, but the latter is quite young. The path was evidently box-edged, as some stretches remain; on the east side there is a row of yews south of it which were formerly trimmed into topiary shapes. The top part of the central north-south path, at least, was also evidently box-edged, and may have had a blind end, as there is a large box bush centred on it at the top at present. Near the central cross path this path is flanked by two yews, which were presumably once clipped into an arch. No box hedging survives in the southern part of the garden. At one time a sundial formed a central feature in the garden, and photographs exist which show the plinth still in position.

There are espalier apples either side of the central cross path - only one, on the south, on the east side, but three on the west. The one on the east has been pruned back into shape, but not the others.

The southern area of the garden is an orchard, containing one or two very old fruit trees as well as some younger ones. There are also some ornamental trees, including a large pittosporum.

There are two slate water tanks, one catching a trickle of water which comes in by the stables in the north-east corner, and one at the end of the frames. Near the former is a seat made from a slate slab, with paving in front, against the east wall. A curiosity is a depiction of a dog in white pebbles on a black pebble background which is set into the ground against the east wall of the 'swimming pool'; there is reputed to be a second version with the colours reversed, but this has not yet been found.

The garden was originally filled with soil brought up from the Cob during the work there, to augment the thin soil of the hillside. Although it was neglected before it came into the hands of the school, it is well on the way to being reclaimed, and remains surprisingly fertile.

Sources

Primary

Information from staff at the school (Alison Duncan, Judy Harris)

Leaflet on woodland walks produced by the school

SSSI listing information

Photograph (1808), County Archives, Caernarfon (XS/1024/19)

Photographs, school's collection

Particulars of sale of 1921, County Archives, Caernarfon (Z/F/148)

Secondary

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

Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, *Inventory*, Caernarvonshire Vol. II (1960)