

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

SITE DOSSIER

Pontypool Park

REF. NO. PGW (Gt) 26

OS MAP 171 **GRID REF.** SO 285007

FORMER COUNTY Torfaen **COMMUNITY COUNCIL** Trevethin

DESIGNATIONS Listed building: St Alban's School (main house) (grade II), Park Buildings (stables) (grade II), shell grotto (grade II), Rustic Lodge (grade II)
National Park (Site of folly only: Brecon Beacons National Park) CA (house and stables only)

SITE EVALUATION **Grade II***

Primary reasons for grading

Early 19th-century landscape park (with modern additions), with outstanding and well preserved 19th-century shell hermitage, thought to be the most important grotto in Wales. Large mid 19th-century arboretum (American Gardens), including early plantings of American conifers. Unusual early 19th-century twin ice-houses.

TYPE OF SITE

Landscape park with shell hermitage; arboretum; walled kitchen garden

MAIN PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

c. 1811-1840

VISITED BY/DATE Elisabeth Whittle/September 1990 and February 1991

HOUSE

Pontypool Park House

Grid ref SO 283010

Date/style c. 1694; 1752-65; 1800-1810; 1872/Georgian; Regency; Victorian

Brief description

Pontypool Park House is a substantial two-storey rendered building of Georgian/Regency/Victorian appearance. It stands on low-lying ground in the SW corner of the park, just E of the Afon Lwyd river. The main entrance drive is to the SE. The substantial stable block and other domestic offices lie to the W of the house.

The Hanbury family were ironmasters, and the first to come to Pontypool was Richard Hanbury in about 1576. The first house on the site was built by Major John Hanbury c. 1694. It faced E, in front of which was a bowling green. A small free-standing chapel and dovecot were added to the W (where the stable block now is). The house was extended westwards in 1752-65, and was further altered in 1800-1810 by Capel Hanbury Leigh, who moved the front to the S and added the pillared portico. In 1872, when John Hanbury Leigh inherited the house, the west end was demolished and the present Victorian extension built.

In 1915 the house was let to a religious order (the Sisters of the Holy Ghost), and in 1920, just before John Hanbury died (1921), it was sold to the three local authorities. The house is now used as a school (St Alban's), and various modern blocks have been added to it.

Until the beginning of the 19th century the house had formal gardens to its E and S, with a bowling green to the E, terraces, and a canal. These were all swept away by Capel Hanbury Leigh shortly after 1800 and replaced by sloping lawns and a landscape park.

OUTBUILDINGS

Stable block

Grid ref SO 282010

Date/style, and brief description

The stable block lies to the W of the house. It was built c. 1800-1810 by Capel Hanbury Leigh, replacing the earlier stables which lay to the E of the house (much admired by Ralph Allen in 1730). Building the new stables entailed demolishing not only the old stables but the chapel and dovecote. The stable block is stuccoed, Regency in style, with a hipped roof, arranged around a courtyard, with an entrance on the N side. The single-storey parts were stables, the line of double doors marks the coach-houses, and the adjacent two-storey block housed tack rooms. The circular feature in the middle of the courtyard was a horse trough. Part of the block is now in use as a museum.

THE PARK

Central grid ref SO 288010

Date/style

18th-early 19th century; 20th century/landscape; arboretum; public recreational additions (20th century)

GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

The park occupies an area of steeply undulating ground to the N of the centre of Pontypool. On the S side it is bounded by the Afon Lwyd river, on the W by housing, on the E by the Nant y Gollen stream (N end) and the high ridge top overlooking Pontypool and east Gwent (S end). The Nant y Gollen stream runs through the park, and is dammed to form two small lakes (1975) which replaced the single one created in the early 1800s. Except for a section in the middle on which the Penygarn estate is built the park remains intact, although the southern half has been heavily utilised in the 20th century for modern leisure facilities (Leisure Centre, Rugby ground, ski slope, recreation ground, bandstand, Italian Gardens). To the N of the Penygarn estate lies the American Gardens, a large arboretum planted in 1851 with conifers newly introduced from America (supposedly to relieve unemployment). At its N end is a Rustic Lodge, an early 19th-century cottage originally the woodkeeper's cottage. The shell hermitage, built in the 1830s, and thought to have been designed by a Mr Tit, is situated on the ridge top near the E boundary of the park, as is the site of the 18th-century folly, to the N of the park.

The main entrance to the park is the Pontymoel Gates, magnificent iron gates built in the 1720s and remodelled in 1835, in the SE corner. The drive crosses the park from here to the N side of the house.

The land of the park was bought by Capel Hanbury in 1677 and 1689. To the E of the Nant y Gollen stream it was turned into a deer park by Major John Hanbury in about 1700. The park remained more or less in its natural state of open grassland and deciduous woodland until the improvements of Capel Hanbury Leigh at the beginning of the 19th century. Visitors at the end of the 18th century described it as varied, with 'very beautiful forms' (Williams), and very fine, picturesque, with 'no vestige of art' (Coxe). By 1752 the main drive was in existence, with tripartite iron gates at Pontymoel bridge (made in the 1720s). The 1752 map also shows two avenues on the ridge to the E of the house, which must have gone by 1800. In the second half of the 18th century Capel Hanbury built the folly on the ridge-top to the N of the park. This was rebuilt as a hexagonal castellated tower in 1837, and was demolished in 1940. Only its base survives. Between the folly and the shell hermitage is a small cottage, Pen y Parc, which was formerly a gamekeeper's cottage.

Major changes were made to the park and garden by Capel Hanbury Leigh in the first half of the 19th century. At the beginning of the century the formal gardens to the E and S of the house were swept away and replaced by 'a lawn of verdure' (Coxe). The Nant y Gollen stream was dammed to form a lake. The shell hermitage was started in 1830, said variously to have been made (the interior) by the first wife of Capel Hanbury Leigh and by a hermit, working at it for seven years. It was used until the end of the First World War for lunch parties. The Pontymoel Gates were erected at the entrance to the park in 1835, and a large bank was made to the S of the drive, and planted to screen

the ironworks and town from visitors. The American Gardens, a large arboretum of mixed coniferous and deciduous trees, with an emphasis on American conifers, including some now very large Sequoia sempervirens, Monkey Puzzles and Wellingtonias, was planted at the north end of the park in 1851. A cottage orné, the Rustic Lodge, was built at its N end early in the century. In 1833 all the ironworks, which had until then occupied a site just N of the Afon Lwyd (now just W of the Leisure Centre) were moved S of the river. A large kitchen garden was in existence to the N of the house by the 1880s (OS map), and a pair of ice-houses was built into the slope just to the NW of the house in the first half of the century. The folly was rebuilt as a hexagonal castellated tower in 1837, and the Pontymoel gates were remodelled to their present form in 1835. The last Hanbury to live here, John Hanbury (d. 1921), made 'Italian Gardens' to the S of the Afon Lwyd. These were formal gardens planted with exotic plants, and have since been 'municipalised'.

After the park was transferred to public ownership in 1920 various additions of a recreational kind were made to the S end of the park: the Gorsedd Circle of stones in 1923, the bandstand in 1931, the Ring (rugby ground) in 1925, tennis courts in 1924, bowling green in 1925, children's play area in 1920. The ski slope, two ponds and Leisure Centre were all additions of the 1970s.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Drives

The main entrance drive enters the park at the Pontymoel Gates, in the SE corner of the park, and runs northwestwards across the lower end of the park to the house. Near the house it bifurcates, one branch going to the S front and one to the N. This is no longer used as a drive, but as a path (tarmacked). The house is now approached from the W, formerly the back entrance, with a short drive to its N front.

At the N end of the park a drive runs through the American Gardens to the Rustic Lodge and on to the site of the folly. It starts at the S end of the American Gardens (SO 287015), and runs NE through them to the Rustic Lodge. Towards the N end of this section the ground to the E is levelled up and revetted with a crumbling stone wall. The drive crosses the Nant y Gollen stream over a stone bridge and winds through farmland northwards to the site of the folly. This part is now reduced to a farm track.

The paths in the centre of the park, most now tarmacked, follow the routes of the old park paths (as shown on the 1880s OS 6" map), and although some are now disused their courses can still be discerned. A path (c. 2 m. wide, levelled) running along the W side of the Nant y Gollen stream through the American Gardens remains in part. Its lower side is revetted in stone (slightly ruinous and mossy).

There is a large bank, made in the 1830s, at the E end of the park, between the drive and the river. It was planted to screen the town from visitors.

WATER FEATURES

The park is bounded on its S side by the Afon Lwyd river. The Nant y Gollen stream runs through the park N-S. This is a natural stream, although it was controlled by sluice gates at Tank Cottage (just N of the park, at SO 290021), whose occupants controlled the gates. At SO 288008 there are two stone revetted ponds of irregular outline, one above the other, in the bottom of the Nant y Gollen valley. These are modern, built in the 1970s, and replaced the old lake made at the beginning of the 19th century at the same place.

In the middle of the American Gardens, along the W side of the drive, is a narrow pond, now much silted up and overgrown.

To the west of the house is a small, tree-fringed pond. This probably relates to the park and probably had a utilitarian purpose.

BUILT FEATURES

Walls

The E boundary of the park S of Pen-y-parc is formed by a stone wall, crumbling and ruinous in places, with a maximum height of c. 2.5 m.

Lodges and cottages

Lodge on W side of Penygarn Road, just W of entrance to American Gardens (SO 286015). Simple rendered two-storey gabled cottage (private ownership).

Rustic lodge (SO 290019). Small two-storey stone cottage orn^{te}. Hipped roof, rustic porch on N side. Built of large irregular blocks roughly coursed, casement windows, scalloped barge boards. A low stone wall in front. Built early 19th century, and originally the woodkeeper's cottage (private ownership).

Pen-y-parc cottage (SO 294011). Small two-storey stone and slate gabled cottage with porch on S side (private ownership).

In the 1830s a small single-storey lodge was built on the S side of the Pontymoel Gates. It is now gone (demolished 1959).

Bridge

Single arched stone bridge over the Nant y Gollen stream to E of Rustic Lodge, taking drive to the folly.

Ironwork

Pontymoel gates

Elaborate wrought iron gates at the entrance to the park in the SE corner (SO 286006), built by Thomas Deakin in 1835. They replaced earlier iron gates, mentioned in 1805 (Evans). They consist of a central pair of gates with an elaborate overthrow, open cylindrical iron piers entwined with vine stalks and leaves, flanked by pedestrian gates and smaller similar piers. The park is bounded on either side by iron railings.

War Memorial gates

The War Memorial on the SW boundary of the park, between the Afon Lwyd and Commercial Street, was built in 1924. The central gates were taken from the archway between the stables and the house. The gates are wrought iron, with scrolled decoration and an elaborate overthrow. There is a possibility that these gates were given to Major John Hanbury by Sarah Duchess of Marlborough, which would date them to 1722-34.

There is further ironwork on the boundary of the American Gardens: at the entrance is a simple iron gate flanked by iron railings, and along the W boundary is an iron fence.

At the park boundary on the S side of Pen-y-parc cottage is an iron gate with iron gateposts.

At the back entrance to the park, just N of the stables, is a pair of wrought iron gates with iron gatepiers. These were moved here from the S side of the stable block.

The Folly SO 295025

The Folly stood on the ridge-top c. 1 mile to the N of the park. From the site there are panoramic views in all directions, and in particular E out over Gwent. The Folly was first built by Capel Hanbury in the second half of the 18th century, and was rebuilt in 1837 by Capel Hanbury Leigh as a tall octagonal battlemented tower, built of white stone. It was demolished in 1940, by which time it was ruinous (and thought to be a potential marker for German aircraft).

All that exists now is a grass-covered mound with large blocks of stone and part of the octagonal base protruding. The carriage drive approaches from the W (now a farm track), and skirts the E side of the mound.

Note

The folly has now been rebuilt on its original site.

The Shell Hermitage SO 293010

The shell hermitage or grotto stands on the ridge-top on the E side of the park, S of Pen-y-parc cottage. It is reasonably well preserved, and is now shut, locked and surrounded by iron railings. It is partly overgrown and neglected. It was built in the 1830s, designed by a Bath architect, S.G. Tit, and is said to have been the inspiration of Capel Hanbury Leigh's first wife, Molly Mackworth. It was used for lunch parties by the Hanbury family, when fresh moss was brought up and arranged in the crevices in the walls. A fire was lit in the fireplace until within living memory.

The hermitage is a circular stone building with a conical stone slate roof, an entrance passageway on the E, and a chimney (on the NW). The present entrance is on the E, and there may have been a further one on the S side, now disused. There were originally four windows with stained glass in them, but the glass has gone and the two remaining windows are shut with iron casements.

Inside, the floor is of stone, with bones and teeth (predominantly horse and deer) set into it forming interlacing arcs, stars and a ring of hearts and diamonds. The outer borders of the floor are of river- or sea-rounded pebbles. The ceiling is vaulted, held on six lath and plaster pillars standing on wider circular bases, encrusted with red rock and shell patterns (the lath and plaster is now exposed in many places). On the

ceiling are false stalactites of shells, some real ones (stalagmites upside down), and small shells, some larger exotic ones, clusters of spar, stars of crystal, all set in patterns. Areas are marked out with lines of orner shells, and within them are rectangular panels of shells arranged in floral and geometric patterns. The walls are set with curving tree branches, elm bosses, ivy stems, lumps of bark, dried moss, red rock, and stalactites.

The materials used are all of reasonably local origin. Most of the shells are of British origin, and many could have been obtained in Wales. There are a few exotic shells, including pearl oyster, conch, and small cowrie shells.

Standing inside are five rustic wooden chairs (originally six), which are reasonably well preserved.

The icehouses

SO 284011

Set into the steep slope just to the N of the stables is an unusual pair of icehouses, built in their present form in the early 19th century (1830s). They are circular, with domed tops, and stand side by side, c. 2.7 m. high and 7 m. in overall length. They have an outer skin of stone and an inner one of brick, separated by a narrow gap (at the back there are two outer layers, separated by gaps), and have an iron band around the top. In the top of both is a circular hole. Behind them is a stone revetment wall c. 2.5 m. high.

20th-century features

Gorsedd Circle (SO 287012): a circle of stones set up in the park in 1923 (National Eisteddfod in Pontypool 1924)

Bandstand (SO 285009): octagonal iron and tile bandstand in circular tarmac area, to the NW of the rugby ground. Erected in 1931 as a memorial to Mr S.T. Roderick.

The Ring (SO 286008): sports ground, originally for cricket, built in 1925, and since 1945 home of the Pontypool Rugby Football Club.

Modern leisure facilities include the tennis courts (1924), bowling green (1925), children's play area (1920), ski slope, to the N of the lakes, and the Leisure Centre to the S of The Ring.

The Italian Gardens

SO 283008

This is a narrow area lying between the Afon Lwyd and the town which was originally laid out by John Hanbury in the late 19th-early 20th century as formal gardens planted with exotic species. This area has been rebuilt recently by the Borough Council with winding paths (brick and tarmac), steps, and a circular pool and single jet fountain. Some of the original trees remain.

PLANTED COMPONENTS

The park can be divided into three main sections from the point of view of the planting: the S end, the middle, and the N end.

The south end

This part of the park is the most municipalised. Here there are large areas of mown grass, interspersed with specimen trees (deciduous and coniferous, with mature sweet chestnuts, limes and oaks being prominent). The steep bank to the N of the house (former shrubbery) is planted with mixed deciduous and coniferous trees (including yew), with an underplanting of rhododendrons. To its E is a small plantation of Scots pines with flowering cherries around the perimeter. To the N of the Pontymoel entrance is an area of semi-natural deciduous woodland. On the slope below the S front of the house are two large Monkey Puzzle trees and a group of laurels and rhododendrons. In the Italian Gardens are a few large conifers.

The middle

The middle section of the park, from the lakes to the Penygarn estate, is more natural, with rough grass, bracken and semi-natural woodland. On the upper slopes of the ridge on the E side of the park are clumps (all 20th-century) of Scots pines, birches and beech trees (on the skyline). Just to the S of Pen-y-parc cottage is a row of ancient sweet chestnut trees.

The north end

The north end of the park is taken up with the American Gardens, an area of mixed deciduous and coniferous woodland, largely planted in 1851. The woodland is largely mixed deciduous, but is interspersed with specimen conifers, including wellingtonias, monkey puzzles, Californian redwoods, yews, cypresses and pines. These have reached a great size and tower above the general canopy. There is an underplanting of laurels and rhododendrons.

BOUNDARIES

S side: Afon Lwyd and Pontypool town

W side: Pontypool town; iron fence (American Gardens)

N side: field boundary

E side: N end: Nant y Gollen stream

S end: field boundary (E-W section W of Pen-y-parc)
stone wall

ESSENTIAL SETTING, VIEWPOINTS AND CONTINUATIONS OF FEATURES BEYOND THE PARK, EYECATCHERS

Essential setting: farmland to the E of the Nant y Gollen stream in the northern half of the park

Viewpoints: E from the shell hermitage (A) and all around from the site of the Folly (B)

Features beyond the park: the Folly

LAND-USE

Municipal park (S and middle)
Woodland (neglected): American Gardens

**ELEMENTS OF BOTANICAL OR OTHER NATURE CONSERVATION
INTEREST**

Specimen conifers in the American Gardens
Diverse bird population in the park

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

Structural components: most
Water features: little (except natural)
Built components: most
Planted components: most

UTILITARIAN GARDENS

Kitchen garden

Grid ref SO 283012

Date/style 19th century/walled

DESCRIPTION

The walled kitchen garden is situated to the N of the house, on higher ground sloping gently NE-SW. It is four-sided and is walled around most of its perimeter with a stone/brick wall (stone outside, brick inside) with a maximum height of 3.5 m. The garden is reached from the house by a steep narrow path at the W end of the shrubbery. The S wall is partly rebuilt, and much stands to its full height in the western half. The wall only stands c. 2 m. high in the eastern half. Only the N half of the W wall is standing, and only to c. 2.5 m. (the top is crumbling). The E wall is similar, and stands for its full length. The N wall is similar, standing up to 3. m. high on the W side, at the W end of which is an angled section with blocked doorways and bricks laid at an angle. On the E side the N wall is partly missing and partly built into private garden walls.

The interior has a road running NW-SE down the middle (on the site of the former central path). To the E it is taken up with allotments, with the central cross path (tarmac) remaining. To the W a Gwent County Council Residential Home has been built on it (Plas-y-garn House), with the rest of the area turfed over. In the NW corner is a raised area built up on a stone and brick wall (turf on top). All glasshouses, which were at the N end of the garden, have gone: the only remnants are some very overgrown footings to the E of the road.

SOURCES

Primary

1752 map ('A South Prospect', 'An Accurate Plan of the Seat and Park of the honorable Capel Hanbury Esq.') (Pontypool Estate Office)

Japan Ware tray c. 1764: 'The South view of Pontypool House' (Torfaen Museums Trust)

Four sketches by John Rolls, c. 1827 (Gwent Record Office: D 361 F/P3.31)

Two watercolour sketches by Frances de Bunsen, 1809 (Newport Reference Library: xM416.6 758.1)

Late 19th-early 20th century photographs (Gwent Record Office: D 554.181)

Secondary

D. Williams, A History of Monmouthshire (1796)

W. Coxe, A Historical Tour of Monmouthshire (1801)

J. Bradney, A History of Monmouthshire, Part II

B. Jones, Follies and Grottoes

D. Griffiths, 'Pontymoel Park Gates', The Pontypool Recorder (1976)

R. Hanbury Tenison, Pontypool Park: a brief history (unpublished)