

BRYN BRAS CASTLE

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 41 (GWY)
OS Map	115
Grid Ref	SH 544 626
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Gwynedd
Community Council	Llanrug
Designations	Listed buildings: House II*, house (Coed Goleu/Fernlea), screen wall and outbuildings II.
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading Varied garden with design basically unchanged since originally laid out in 1830s-40s. Woodland, water garden, lawn and formal areas blending into each other. Two 1920s garden buildings and well-preserved paths system.

Type of Site Woodland garden with ponds and stream, former kitchen garden converted to rose garden, lawns with statuary near house, rockery and 'mountain walk'.

Main Phases of Construction 1830s and 1840s, 1920s.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The house is a large, battlemented, turreted stone building in gothic style, consisting of a two-storey central block linking two taller circular towers. It is believed to have been designed by Thomas Hopper, architect of nearby Penrhyn Castle, in the early 1830s. There is a covered bridge linking the house with the main group of outbuildings, which is on the far side of a minor road.

The central block of the house has three wide, recessed arches on the garden side (which is the main front); at one time these were glazed in to give a narrow conservatory, known as the orangery.

The kennels, which are small but built on the grand scale, castellated and turreted, are at the southern end of the castle, on the same side of the road. They have an iron gate and railings. Apart from rambling extensions at the back of the house, these are the only outbuildings which fall within the designated area.

The first extant map showing the castle is the tithe map of 1839, on which the building is

shown much as today, with the two lodges, stables, and some other outbuildings, which are therefore probably all contemporary with the castle, as their design would suggest. The owner at this time was Thomas Williams, who is named as the proprietor of Bryn Bras Castle from 1832; his elder brother, the Rev. Owen Gethin Williams, owned Coed Goleu until about 1830, but is never named in connection with Bryn Bras Castle, although he did not die until 1854. It seems therefore that after 1830 for some reason the property came into Thomas's hands, and the building of the castle can be dated with a high degree of probability to between 1830 and 1832.

The title map shows a wall running south-east of the castle linking the two roads, enclosing a small area called the 'castle yard'; this has an opening in it flanked by two small towers, giving on to the area which is now the pleasure grounds. An enclosure on the far side of the road, west of the castle, is named as the kitchen garden. The area south of the kitchen garden and around the stables may have been in the early stages of being laid out as parkland - at any rate, the first edition 1-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1840-41 shows it as such. This therefore seems to be about the time when the layout of the park and garden was designed. An engraving of 1841 shows the house, but unfortunately nothing of the garden.

Subsequent development can be traced through the 25-inch Ordnance Survey maps of 1889, 1900 and 1914, and a plan contained in sales particulars of 1913. Thomas Williams was probably responsible for planting the woodland and laying out the park, creating the garden, and later relocating the kitchen garden nearer the house. He died in 1874 (at the age of 81, after an eventful life during which he was accused of forging the will of his father-in-law, Jones Panton of Plas Gwyn, Anglesey, and was acquitted after a famous trial at the Old Bailey), leaving the castle to his sister's grandson, Rev. Charles Bodvell Griffith. Rev. Griffith seems not to have lived at Bryn Bras, and by 1880 it belonged to William Dew, who began an estate agency business but was unlucky on the Stock Exchange and became bankrupt, having to sell the castle in 1890. The purchaser was Charles Davison of Flintshire, but he does not seem to have stayed long and the castle was bought in 1897 by Capt. Frank Stewart Barnard, who was High Sheriff of Caernarvonshire 1903-4, and something of a philanthropist. He stayed at the castle until his death in 1917, despite attempting to sell it in 1913, and ran it as a stud, converting part of the park area to this use.

Barnard made changes in the garden and built a wooden bungalow in the south corner; the 'mountain walk' path up on to the knoll south-east of the garden also first appears on the 1914 map, following the same route as today. Barnard also created some features on the far side of the road, apart from those associated with his stud farm, such as a summer house in the centre of a circular copse, a flagstaff and a small area of kitchen garden (called 'lower garden' on the 1913 plan), which was in the area of the original kitchen garden and presumably replaced the part of the later kitchen garden which now became a tennis court.

Although the estate was offered for sale in 1913, it was not sold until after the First World War, in 1918, following which it changed hands again, twice. During this time, in 1919, most of the timber was felled (it is thought for use in shipbuilding), although the ornamental trees nearest the house were left. In 1920 the estate was finally acquired by a wealthy new owner,

Duncan Elliot Alves, originally a New Zealander, who immediately set about making improvements, including erecting the garden buildings and installing statuary; but what was done in the park is hard to say, as so little is now left.

Alves, who was an oil magnate, was Lord Mayor of Caernarfon for six years, and was friendly with Lloyd George and other important figures of the day. He entertained lavishly and spent a great deal of money on the house and grounds, including creating a lake (on the far side of the southern road and now in a caravan park) for a private hydro-electric scheme and re-routing the northern lane where it passed closest to the castle, to enclose the small triangular paddock to the north-west.

Alves died in 1938, and his wife, who was 27 years his junior, died rather young in 1947. They had no children. During the Second World War Mrs Alves let the house to a Catholic school for delicate children, and sold it in 1946. The purchaser was Tom Welch, who lived there until he died suddenly in 1953 aged only 40. He made further improvements to the grounds, but when he died the castle was again sold, to an industrialist named Charles Sydney Cowap, who, however, sold it on after four years. It was then bought by Patrick Durkin and converted to a hotel and country club, the farmlands being sold off; the grounds were opened to the public for the first time in June 1958. Durkin died in 1964 and the rest of the estate was broken up and sold; the castle and garden came into the hands of the present family, who have made the castle their home and converted part of it into self-catering holiday accommodation. They have largely restored the gardens and continue to work on the remaining areas.

There is no designed parkland left, and it is uncertain to what extent the areas outside the garden ever were parkland in the accepted sense, but two small areas beyond the garden boundary, which must once have formed part of the park, remain. To the north-west is a small triangular paddock, now mown, and to the south-east a rocky knoll. In 1913 this was a rabbit warren and has since been lightly grazed, but is now woodland and heathland. A path known as the 'mountain walk' leads to the top of this hill, which is an excellent viewpoint.

As the house is immediately by the road and the stables are on the other side, there is no drive in the usual sense. However, in 1923 Alves, to move the road junction farther away from the house, built a new stretch of road to the north-west, taking the northern lane farther west before its junction with the southern, and the old piece of road became a kind of drive and parking area for the house, just outside the garden wall on the north side. This has recently had new post-and-rail fence and ranch-style gates erected to close it off, and is gravelled.

A track leading into the park area to the south-west (now the entrance to the caravan site) is shown on the 1-in. Ordnance Survey map of 1841 (which was surveyed about 20 years earlier and not fully updated before publication), apparently leading to a building of unknown purpose, now gone, in the middle of the park.

The 'mountain walk' path is shown for the first time on the Ordnance Survey map of 1914. The path follows much the same route today, but now winds through light woodland which has established itself on the north and west sides of the hill. There are a few steps near the bottom

and where the path cuts across a steep slope it has been levelled into it; there may even be places where the outcropping rock has been cut away, but there is no evidence of edging or surface.

The paddock, with a pond in the corner, was created when Alves altered the road junction in 1923. This has never really been parkland, but does improve the approach to the house from the north-west. The large lake which was created by Alves for his hydro-electric scheme still survives in the area belonging to the caravan park, with a boat house, and is now described by the Ordnance Survey as a reservoir.

The remaining garden area and the knoll with the 'mountain walk' path are all enclosed within a wall, partly dry-stone and partly mortared. A similar wall runs along the caravan park side of the south-western lane. Alongside the drive on the north the wall is mortared and buttressed and higher, with a partly retaining function as the ground level in the garden is well above that of the drive.

The entrance to the southern lane, west of the house, is guarded by a pair of turrets, one on the extreme western corner of the garden wall and one on the park wall to the south. These are shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1889, but there is a clear joint where the stretch of wall on the north side of the road, which terminates in the turret, meets the main garden wall. There is also a joint where this same wall, the mortared retaining wall along the drive/parking area north of the house, meets the kitchen garden wall, so there may be three phases of walling, on the face of it all pre-1889. The latest appears to be the wall at the north-west, including the turrets by the road and the main pair of gate piers, but tellingly the gate piers are shown as square on all the old maps, whereas now they are round, altered by Alves; as the style is very similar to that of the turrets by the road it is possible that he also rebuilt these and their adjoining wall.

The description of the garden in the particulars of sale of 1913 reads: 'The Pleasure Grounds which occupy about 10 acres have been most tastefully laid out and consist of Wooded Slopes and Shrubberies, which are interlaced by Shady and Pleasant Walks, Paths and a Rosary. The Stream, which flows through the Grounds, forms a series of Ornamental Cascades and Ponds (which are well-stocked with Trout), and is crossed at intervals by prettily designed Rustic Bridges...The Gardens are well arranged, and contain a Fountain, a Conservatory, Palm House &c; two Peach Houses and Vinery...all well-stocked with Fruit Trees and Ornamental and Flowering Shrubs.' Apart from the rosary, which has become an area of lawn and shrub beds, the trout, and the glasshouses, which are reduced to one, this description still holds good today.

There are two vehicular entrances from the southern lane, one opposite the stable-yard and one opposite the entrance to the caravan site. The former appears to have been the main entrance, having large, round, castellated gate piers reminiscent of the towers of the castle, and very similar to the piers either side of the lane north-west of the bridge to the stable-yard. There is a shallow stone arch over double, studded wooden doors. The wheat-sheaf crest in the middle of the arch and the initial 'A' on each pier suggests that Alves altered, if he did not build, these gates. The entrance further south-east has lower, squat, square stone piers with a pair of

sturdy iron gates; there is no arch over but the piers carry very weathered stone shields, facing each other across the gates.

There are two metal gates with simple stone-built gateposts in the wall dividing the garden area from the rocky knoll to the south-east, one leading into the small field where the wooden bungalow once stood, and one giving access to the 'mountain walk'. There is also a wooden door in the main outer wall at the north-west corner of the walled garden, which may have been inserted later, as there is a good deal of brick around it.

Apart from these, the only other entrance is a pedestrian door from the drive/parking area which was formerly part of the northern lane. This is a wooden door fitted into a round-headed arched doorway in the wall, opening immediately on to slate steps ascending into the garden, with castellated flanking walls and small castellated piers at the top. Outside there are low flanking walls either side, curving back to meet the main garden wall, and these too are castellated with small stone piers either side of the entrance. The wall above the pond opposite echoes the style.

The garden consists of three main areas. The largest, to the north and east, is woodland, containing a look-out tower and a complex of informal paths, the layout of which has now changed slightly as paths have become overgrown and been re-cut, although several of the original paths remain. Most of the trees were replanted following felling in 1919. The look-out tower was built (of brick, rendered) in the 1920s to replace the summer house which previously stood in the same spot. The tower is circular, with one ground-floor room and a viewing platform on the roof reached by internal stairs. The door is on the south-east side, reached by a few steps. The windows have bars but are not glazed.

The second largest area is the water garden, along the south-west edge of the garden, with the stream running north-west through a series of four ponds. The uppermost is the largest, with a long concrete dam. An underwater wall separates the swimming part from the planted part and there is an island. The remaining ponds are much smaller and entirely ornamental. All ponds are planted round with shrubs and damp-loving plants. There are bridges, dams, a derelict fountain in the upper pool, and a tower, with a run of several small decorative waterfalls crossing the lawn just in front of the house. The stone, castellated tower is tall and slim and echoes the shape of the piers of the nearby gateway, to one of which it is linked by a length of stone walling. A waterfall emerges from its base to fill the third pool down the series. The tower is stone-built and castellated, and may have been constructed out of the stone from the demolished southern part and tower of the original courtyard wall, which it post-dates. It is possible that the original character of the water garden was more formal than it now appears, before the plantings grew to give the present luxuriant setting, but it is clear from old maps that the paths always curved and the layout was never symmetrical.

The third area, immediately east of the house, consists of semi-formal lawns and borders, with gravel walks, and extends south-eastwards either side of the main north-west to south-east walk, with a rockery and more lawn and beds on the site of the former rosary. The former kitchen garden, now laid out as a box parterre, fits into the north-east corner of this area, with its

arched walls acting as a backdrop.

Thomas Williams, the probable builder of the castle, seems also to have been the original creator of the garden and was probably responsible for planting the woodland within it and laying out the paths. He must also have built the courtyard wall shown on the tithe map of 1839 and laid out the kitchen garden in the park area on the far side of the lane. Whether he was also responsible for demolishing part of the courtyard wall and one of its towers to create the water garden and abandoning the kitchen garden in favour of one nearer the house, both of which had been done by 1889, is debatable, but as he owned the castle for over forty years, until his death in 1874, he had ample time to change his mind about his original design and must be considered a possible author of these alterations. His heir probably never lived at the castle and so is not a likely candidate, but the other possibility is William Dew, who owned the castle from 1880 to 1890.

The remaining courtyard wall, with the other tower, survived until after 1900. The stone from the demolished tower may have been used to build the smaller tower which now forms part of the water garden, a waterfall issuing from its base.

Between 1889 and 1900 the amount of glass in the kitchen garden was much increased, and some of the trees closest to the house were removed to begin creating the lawns. The croquet lawn (possibly also at one time used for tennis) seems to have been the first, and by 1900 had a very small building on it, on the site of the present summer house. These alterations must have been made by Barnard or his predecessor Davison; Barnard seems to have been fond of tennis, as the later reducing in size of the kitchen garden, definitely carried out by him, seems to have been for no other purpose than to create a better tennis court.

Most of the rest of the forecourt wall must have been demolished, along with its tower, by Barnard between 1900 and 1913, at the time that the size of the kitchen garden was reduced. The shortened wall left was probably still the original structure, as the glasshouse against it was retained, and the base of the old wall may still survive at the foot of Alves' arched wall. The line of the rest of it is approximately marked by the paths across the lawn to the kitchen garden and leading to the gate on to the south-west lane nearest to the house.

Barnard also built the wooden bungalow, now demolished, in the south corner of the garden, and the 'mountain walk' path up on to the knoll south-east of the garden first appears on the 1914 map, following the same route as today. He also created some features on the far side of the road, including a summer house in the centre of a circular copse, which may or may not be the one pictured in the 1913 particulars of sale (one already existed in the woodland part of the garden itself).

Alves, the owner from 1920, made many improvements and spent enormous sums of money, but without much changing the basic layout within the garden. He built the present, stone, summer house, close to the castle in the corner of the kitchen garden wall, and replaced the old, probably wooden, summer house in the woods with a brick look-out tower. He acquired quantities of statuary, some of which (notably a pair of figures known as the Gladiators, which

stand on the lawn in front of the house, and a figure of Pan in the kitchen garden) is still in the garden. He also rebuilt the kitchen garden walls in their present decorative, arched style; and he doubtless planted extensively, including replanting the timber felled just after the First World War. His crest, a sheaf of wheat with the motto 'Deo favente', appears in several places in the house, and outside on the bridge linking it with the outbuildings south-west of the lane.

The widowed Mrs Alves sold the castle in 1946. The new owner, Tom Welch, died young only seven years later, but made further improvements to the grounds, including turning part of the uppermost, and largest, pool in the water garden into a swimming pool. Bryn Bras was subsequently converted to a hotel and country club but has since been restored to use as a family home. The gardens and grounds have been almost completely restored and are very well maintained.

There is no drive within the garden, but it seems clear that the wide main walk, which runs north-west to south-east, was formerly used as such, and the walk branching south-west off it near the house end also. Both these have wide double gates leading on to the south-west lane, in the latter case immediately opposite the stables. The further gate is opposite the track leading into the park area which is now the caravan site's entrance drive.

The drive layout within the garden was probably created at the same time as the water garden, since the south-west approach crosses between two ponds, and the original courtyard wall would have made access to the house difficult from this direction. The former drives, and the rest of the walks near the house, are now gravelled and used as footpaths; the rest of the path layout seems to be more or less original, with a few paths disused and some minor changes. The paths are mostly edged with stones. The path alongside the swimming pool on the north side is now concrete surfaced, and those in the woods generally unsurfaced, though they were probably all gravelled at one time.

The small area of lawn in front of the present summer house, which has been levelled by creating raised borders around it retained by boulder walls, is the former croquet lawn. The tennis court occupies the former southern part of the kitchen garden, with the new south wall along its northern edge; a backdrop of trees bounds it on the east, and on the other two sides it is open to the surrounding lawns, that on the south rising sharply away from it due to levelling. A scalloped border along the foot of the kitchen garden wall cleverly echoes the shape of the arches in the wall. The kitchen garden seems to have been reduced in size specifically to create this tennis court.

The rockery is not mentioned in the 1913 particulars, nor noted on the plan, so may be a later development. It is on a north-facing slope south-west of the main walk, and consists of medium-sized rocks arranged naturalistically, with a small path along the top leading to a place in front of a large upright slab where there was probably once a seat. The house is not at present visible from here, but it is a good vantage point for overlooking the north-western part of the garden. There is a mown grass strip along the edge of the rockery, which has been partially swamped by laurel and is currently being restored; there is little left of the original planting. New shrubs, including hydrangeas and azaleas, are being planted and a few azaleas

have survived from an earlier, if not the original, planting. The bay tree round which the steps in the middle of the rockery divide may be contemporary with those in the kitchen garden, that is, planted in the 1920s.

The photographs in the 1913 particulars of sale include one of a polygonal, wooden 'rustic' style summer house, now gone. It is not clear whether this was the one in the park, south of the stables, or the one in the garden, east of the house, but in any case they may have been of similar design, although the garden one was older, being shown on all maps from 1889 (the other first appears on the 1913 plan).

There was in addition a wooden bungalow in the southern corner of the garden, which was used as a tea house, games pavilion and so on; this has now gone, and the enclosure it occupied is a small field.

The extant summer house, built by Alves in the 1920s, is quite close to the house, in the north-east corner of the croquet lawn by the kitchen garden wall. It is a single-storey, castellated stone building, half-hexagonal in shape, with its flat back to the corner. There are three large arches which were originally open but now have French windows, from the style possibly inserted in the 1930s. Over these are sun-shades which can be pulled out from the wall, probably quite recent. Inside there are some rustic poles and trelliswork which echo the style of the older summer house photographed in the 1913 particulars. The summer house has been recently used for serving teas to visitors and is still furnished for this purpose.

There are many steps in the garden, mostly in short flights, just to cope with the uneven terrain, and all made of roughly-shaped stone, neatly laid but informal in character. There are several bridges in the garden, of different types. Some are not obvious - the stream simply disappears under a path; others consist of slate slabs laid across a narrow channel. In the upper part of the water garden are two small, stone arched bridges, and similar but larger bridges, with low parapets, cross the stream at north and south ends of the stretch which crosses the lawn immediately in front of the house.

Close to the house one or two large trees survive which may have been planted in the original forecourt. These include a horse chestnut, a lime and an ash. The 1889 map shows conifers in this area which had, however, been cleared by 1900.

Other mature trees, including lime, spruce, cypress and sweet chestnut, form a backdrop to the lawn and tennis court south of the walled garden, and there are further mature trees, including horse chestnut, copper beech and many lime, in the water garden and along the south-west edge of the garden. These three groups are probably the only survivors of the 1919 felling. The group by the lawn has had younger trees added (field maple, copper beech, weeping holly), and the woodland now consists mostly of sycamore and rowan. There is very thick underplanting of laurel and rhododendron to the south, less to the north, where bluebells flourish and there are a few varieties of rhododendron other than *R. ponticum*. In the dell at the top of the water garden are younger limes, with fir, sweet chestnut and an Italian alder.

A group of purple-leaved prunus and variegated hollies has been planted to give a backdrop to the small lawn south of the croquet lawn. Other interesting varieties of holly are to be seen in different places around the garden.

The kitchen garden was probably moved to its present site around the middle of the nineteenth century, having previously been a short distance from the house on the far side of the lane. A pre-existing wall was used for its west side. Being now close to the house and within the ornamental garden, it has since (during the 1920s) been provided with decorative arched walls; old photographs show the earlier plain walls, and iron railings along the south side after it was reduced in size about the turn of the century.

The original kitchen garden to the south-west was probably contemporary with the building of the house, and there is no indication that it ever contained any glasshouses. After the kitchen garden was moved to its present site, most of the old site seems to have become a field, and then a paddock associated with the stud farm which occupied the park in the early years of the twentieth century. However, on the plan in the particulars of sale of 1913 an area at the south-west end of it is named 'lower garden' and shown with three parallel paths linked by a diagonal one along one edge; tree symbols probably indicate fruit trees. There is now a new house built on the site.

Judging by photographs and maps from later in the nineteenth century, the garden was moved to its present site perhaps around the middle of the century. At that time it was larger, extending further to the south, and the site, which still slopes slightly downhill from east to west, was levelled for it; there is quite a steep bank above it on the east. By 1913 it had been reduced in size to accommodate a tennis court on the lawn to the south, thus leaving the central pool and fountain near the south edge. The south wall was replaced with railings.

Between 1889 and 1900 the amount of glass in the kitchen garden was increased, to give a continuous range along the north wall and one glasshouse against the west wall. All of this was retained when the garden was made smaller, but the glasshouse against the west wall cannot have survived the rebuilding of the walls in the 1920s; the north range, however, remained, gradually becoming derelict. One glasshouse has recently been restored and retains its ventilation system and vine rods. The underfloor heating no longer works but the pipes and decorative iron grilles remain in place. This house contained an old vine, but when it was restored the chemicals used to treat the timber unfortunately killed the vine.

The bases of the other glasshouses (two to the west and one to the east) are still present, and gravel paths and borders have been made on and around them. The one adjoining the existing greenhouse on the west was evidently the peach house, as when it was cleared large numbers of peach, apricot or nectarine stones were found on the floor. The boiler house and potting sheds remain, outside the north-west corner of the garden, behind the summer house. These seem to have been a late addition as they are shown for the first time on the 1913 map.

During the 1920s the railings and the west wall, the remnant of the original courtyard wall, were replaced with the present unusual arched stone walls; at the same time, probably, the greater

part of the garden was converted from utilitarian to ornamental function, but the previous use of railings instead of a wall on the south side suggests that the garden was already in part ornamental, or at least meant to be seen. The east wall was reduced in height, but the high, brick-lined stone north wall was retained, in order to keep the glasshouses. This wall, which forms part of the northern boundary of the garden, remains today.

The garden now has three entrances; in the north-west corner a wooden door leads through the wall into the boiler house/potting shed area; there is also a wooden door out on to the road from this area. In the north-east corner some brick and slate steps lead to a small iron gate giving access to a path into the shrubberies. This probably post-dates the demolition of the glasshouse in this corner, as otherwise the steps would have had to rise straight from the glasshouse; but on the other hand the path is an old one and apparently did not lead anywhere else. The main entrance is towards the west end of the south wall, through tall white-painted wrought iron gates made by Brunswick Ironworks, Caernarfon; like the walls and their tall, castellated piers, these date from the 1920s.

The arched walls are of a dark grey stone, about 3.5 m high and swathed in climbing plants. The low arches are built on top of a base wall around a metre high, and are a little under that height themselves; they carry the rest of the wall, which is battlemented, above. On top of the south wall are a pair of eagles, either side of a sundial set in the wall; the latter appears to be concrete, and has a border of fruit and flowers in relief around it. The eagles are probably mock stone.

The garden is now laid out with box hedges and gravel paths in the nearest thing to a symmetrical pattern, given its slightly off-rectangular shape. The box patterns, the spaces planted with roses, fill two of the original four quadrants; the central pool, which is about 3 m in diameter, with concrete lining and surround, is close to the present southern edge of the garden. It has a fountain with a slightly smaller than life-size statue of Pan on a square plinth; this is probably mock stone and is in reasonable condition, if a little mossy. There is no water at present.

Along the southern edge the remaining strip of the garden has been made into a wide border, and there is a similar border along the eastern side. These contain shrubs and herbaceous plants, and climbers on the walls. The western edge has a row of four large bay trees; as the two southernmost are twice as far apart as the others, there were probably originally five, and they may well have been clipped. They are now easily twice the height of the wall. These probably date from the time of the changes in the 1920s, as the fig tree in a small raised bed in the north-west corner may also do. The statue of a male figure in classical dress near this, of mock stone and now headless, was probably originally sited elsewhere in the garden, or at the lower lodge. The box hedges were planted in the 1920s, and were discovered in 1964 under dense nettles and successfully regenerated.

Sources

Primary

Information from Mr and Mrs N. E. Gray-Parry

Particulars of sale of 1913 (National Library)

Aerial photograph (1994), Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

Secondary

Bryn Bras Castle visitor guidebook and leaflet

Bryn Bras Castle garden guidebook