

THE HALL, ABBEYCWMHIR

Ref No	PGW (Po) 46 (POW)
OS Map	147
Grid Ref	SO 055712
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Radnor
Community Council	Abbey Cwmhir
Designations	Listed Building: Abbey ruins Grade II. Scheduled Ancient Monument: Cwmhir Abbey, 17/2249/RD012(POW).
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	Important ancient monastic site in a magnificent picturesque setting overlooked by a Victorian Gothic Hall which extended its formal gardens to include the abbey ruins. The building of the Hall also saw the remodelling of the abbey hamlet, including the church, in a similar style; the hamlet now contributing to the group value of the site.
Type of Site	Monastic ruins in steep wooded valley. Victorian mansion house and gardens; estate village.
Main Phases of Construction	Abbey <u>c.</u> 1200, Hall. <u>c.</u> 1867 on.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Hall stands on the west of garden, on a terrace overlooking the abbey ruins to the south, separated from them by the village road. The Hall Farm, church and other village buildings lie below the Hall to the west and south-west. The Hall is a large austere square house which faces south, executed in a Victorian Gothic style. It has two storeys and an attic, six bays on the south front and three on the east. The first, fourth and sixth south front bays are set with high gables, ornamented by bargeboards, which run into the steeply pitched slate roof. On the ground floor of the fifth and sixth bays there are three-sided bays with ornamental stone parapets set with French windows which lead out on to the croquet lawn. In the centre of the

east front there is a single-storey recessed Tuscan porch with half marble columns and a tiled interior. On the north-east of the house there is a projecting octagonal bay billiard room dated 1894. All of the windows are sashes, those on the south and east fronts are embellished above with slate and brick detail. The west and north sides of the house are service areas, a narrow cobbled and partly covered passage connects the back kitchens with red brick storerooms which are now used for chickens, dogs and doves.

The history of the Hall and the surrounding land is long and complicated. During the thirteenth century this secluded and romantic valley, a stronghold of the Welsh princes, saw the arrival of the Cistercian order who proceeded to build what became one of the greatest Welsh abbeys, on the banks of the river Cwm Hir. The Abbey prospered, amassing extensive local land holdings, until the early fifteenth century when it was plundered and fell into decline. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 the abbey and its land were given to Walter Henley and John Williams, from whom they passed into the Fowler family. Richard Fowler, Sheriff of Radnorshire in 1655, built Devannor (originally called Ty faenor), about 1 km to the east of the present Hall in about 1670. This was one of the great houses of Radnorshire, set within its own deer park of Tyfaenor, in addition to the two ancient deer parks of Great and Little Park, which had been owned by the abbey. This austere three-storeyed stone house still stands. It is now called Devannor and it contains one of the early Methodist chapels, which dates from about 1818. Devannor was the main house of the estate, which extended along the valley, taking in the entire area around Abbeycwmhir. Radnorshire was a poor county and the Fowlers were among the principal land owners. Their relative wealth and position was recorded in an infamous early eighteenth-century rhyme:

Alas alas poor Radnorshire
Never a park, not even a deer,
Never a squire of five hundred a year
Save Richard Fowler of Abbey Cwm-hir

By 1822 the Fowlers' fortunes, and lands, had deteriorated and they sold the estate to a Thomas Wilson, a London business man. He commissioned a survey, and terrier, in 1822 which recorded the lamentable and dilapidated state of the village, the people and the land. The terrier also recorded the presence of a large house near the Abbey ruins, a 'Rabbit bank', or warren, and 'a garden' in the Abbey precinct. This is interesting as it is understood that Wilson actually built the first gentry house in the vicinity of the Abbey on the site of the present Hall. This house was described as being 'small, but elegant' and executed in an 'Elizabethan style' using stone from the abbey. It is possible that the terrier is in fact referring to the Hall Farm, but a 'Hall' is recorded on the tithe map of 1844 in the position of the present house. The 1837 sale particulars also describe the Wilson house as 'recently erected'. Wilson set about improving the surrounding valley and also made a garden which was described in the sale particulars of 1837.

By the mid-1800s the estate was in the hands of the Philips family. They commissioned Poundley and Walker to largely rebuild the Hall in the Gothic style from 1867 which incorporated some of the earlier Wilson house in the east wing. A billiard room on the north-west was added, completed in 1894. The Philips family owned the estate until the 1919 when they sold to the Chamberlain family. The present owners purchased the house from the

Chamberlains in about 1995.

The estate of Abbeycwmhir dates at least from 1200 when part of the Cistercian order founded the abbey. Just to the north of the abbey lay two deer parks, Great and Little Parks, which are older, possibly of Norman origin. It is unknown how long deer remained in the parks. In 1536 the Abbey lands were passed to Walter Henley and John Williams and then to the Fowler family. The Fowlers' land ran to the east of the Abbey as far 'as the crossroads', an unclear reference but one that may refer to the present A 483 in the east. By the late eighteenth century the Fowlers' fortunes had declined and, it would appear, large scale tree felling was embarked upon to make money. In 1822 the new owner of the estate, Thomas Wilson, commissioned a survey which recorded the previous felling of '4,000 oak and other timber, cut for £300'. In 1842 Lewis was led to comment on the 'sadly denuded' hillsides which had been 'once covered with forests of oak'. Interestingly the only areas of the estate which had not been denuded were the deer parks which were still apparently 'partly protected', possibly still being officially interpreted as crown lands following the Dissolution. A few ancient oak, and English elm, still stand in these areas. Wilson's estate covered 2070 acres of enclosed land and he set about improving the land, planting trees and repairing the dilapidated village and church. The terrier, which accompanied his survey, suggested planting potatoes for the villagers between the rows of new trees, but although large-scale tree planting was carried out it is not known if the potato suggestion was acted upon. Wilson's improved estate buildings can still be identified in the valley, both in and outside the village, by iron lattice Gothick windows. The estate gradually decreased in size from the mid 1800s, the Hall Farm finally passing out of the ownership of the Hall in about 1992.

The area around the village is not believed to have changed significantly from about 1900. The only obvious change is in the character of the park woodlands which, since about 1950, have been under Forestry Commission management. Few of the broadwood trees survive. The hills are now covered with larch and noble fir which appear to be reaching maturity. The southern ditch of the Great Park is marked by a forestry track but internal ditches and banks have been eroded by forestry work. The woodlands still contain English Elm. Pasture lies in the bottom of the valley near the river. To the north-west of the Hall, the southern tip of the wood on the Sugar loaf hill is supposed to mark the burial place of the English and Glyndwr men killed in the battle of Bryn Glas in about 1402 which was recorded in Shakespeare's 'Henry IV'.

The 1822 terrier remarked on the 'bold and romantic aspect' of the valley and also noted that Cader Idris could be seen from the abbey ruins on a clear day! Today the valley is still secluded.

The gardens lie to the south, east and north-east of the Hall. They cover about 10 acres, most of which is woodland. A wide tarmacked drive enters the garden through a formal gateway to the south-east of the house. The drive curves up to the house to reach a small rectangular forecourt area on the east front. The formal gates connect to a stone wall which runs along the south garden boundary, separating it from the road beneath. The road lies between 1 and 2m below the level of the garden, descending to the west to curve around the south-west corner of the garden. Between the drive and the south wall there is a gently sloping lawn, on which there are seven oval beds of mature azaleas. There is no fence above the wall,

temporary wind breaks and wire fencing has been erected to control animals and wind. About 30m to the south-west of the main gates there is a narrow parapeted gate set in the wall. A foot path leads up from this gate to intersect the drive just to the south-east of the house.

A narrow tarmac path runs along the south front of the house. To the south of the bay windows there is a rectangular area of lawn, about 10x8m, which was the site of a croquet lawn. This is enclosed on the south by low stone parapets which run along a stone retaining wall which falls about 1-2m to a sloping tree-planted bank below. Two large mature golden yews grow nearby. To the west of the croquet lawn, and separated from it by modern wooden trellis set with an iron gate, there is a small modern flower garden. Four pentagonal beds, cut into the grass, are grouped around a central planter. On the south this garden is enclosed by a continuation of the retaining wall. On the south side this wall is set with corbels, and other stone work, from the Abbey. Mature and overgrown yew, holly and laurel obscure the road beneath.

On the west of the flower garden there is a short stone paved path, separated by a long narrow flower border from a concrete path. To the west of this path there is a simple wooden fence which separates it from a patch of recently cleared ground which descends to the western edge of the garden. This edge is defined by a continuation of the garden wall which, at this point, is about 3m high. The stump of a large wellingtonia is situated in the patch of cleared ground.

On the west of the house a short length of passage connects from a north-east service area, through a stone gateway into the garden. This path intersects with the south front path at the north end of the concrete path. On the north of the forecourt there is a rough rock garden which contains more stones from the abbey. This rockwork covers a steep bank which stands about 2m above the forecourt. The bank descends to the level of the drive in the south-east, in effect enclosing the forecourt. Above the forecourt and rockwork in the east there are two parallel curving terraces about 0.6m above one another which curve back to the north behind the house. A mossed over path runs up the second of these terraces to enter the kitchen garden on the north of the house. To the east of the upper terrace the garden proceeds back towards the main gates as an open sloping tree and shrub planted lawn. Above the terraces the lawn merges into woodland.

The woodland runs up the hill to the north-east garden boundary, the forestry track to the south of Great Park. In the middle of the wood, on a steep-sided terrace, is the site of a grass tennis court. The ground above the court is terraced, although this is obscured beneath a heavy growth of laurel and rhododendron. To the north-east of the tennis court is the broken brick and tile base of a garden building. To the north-west of this the garden enters an area of coppice which is adjacent to the east wall of the kitchen garden. The garden continues around the kitchen garden to the north, through a service area containing the gardener's house and bothies, to descend to the west, along a path, to a fish pond. This fish pond is set at the southern end of the valley between Great and Little Park. An earth dam at its south end retains the water. Victorian pipes and brick-lined channels carry the water down a steep-sided gully to the south-east where it exits the garden area between the east side of the churchyard and the west drive in a stone-lined channel.

The west drive enters the site opposite the pub between a set of stone gate piers. It runs north below a steep bank dotted with the stumps of seven large wellingtonias, before heading back

south-east in a sharp dog-leg to enter the service area on the west of the house. This small gravel and hardcore area lies on the south-west of the kitchen garden. The service buildings opposite the house, lie to the east.

Opposite the garden, on the south side of the road, a simple modern farm gate leads into a field of about 3 acres. The field slopes down towards the Cwm Hir river in the south. The ground runs roughly level for about 20m before sloping steeply towards the ruins of the abbey in the south-east. There is a definite level terrace which may have been a tennis court. To the west the area is enclosed along the farm property boundary by a rough stone wall. Below the farm the area extends further to the west to a field boundary. In the west a line of Lawson cypress defines the boundary. A group of mature beech, oak and plane trees stands on the west of the upper level. Path lines run down towards the Abbey. The line of a drive, or track, runs along a narrow terrace on the north of the abbey connecting the south of the farmyard, in the west, with a field gate in the cypress boundary in the east. The field to the east of the site also contains a few mature oak trees.

The abbey ruins lie west/east. At the east end of the abbey is the grave of Llewelyn ap Gruffyd, a slab of polished slate inscribed with a broadsword. An oak tree stands on the north-east corner of the ruins. Near the south-west of the ruins there is a motte or mount up which a spiral path has been cut. An oak tree grows on the top. An even piece of roughly level ground runs south for about 30m to the north bank of a large oval pond. Four mature trees stand along its north bank and a path appears to run around its perimeter. A further stretch of grass continues for about another 10m to the Cwm Hir river. About 20m to the south-west of the pond a stone weir crosses the narrow, fast flowing river. At the eastern end of the pond a second stone and brick weir controls the flow of water out of the pond into a channel which intersects the confluence of the Cwm Hir and Clywedog rivers. On the south of the Cwm Hir the ground rises steeply as a wooded bank, with rhododendrons.

The early history of the garden area is unclear. Prior to the building of the Hall, and by at least 1837, the area was probably either pasture or rough woodland, set between the southern boundary of Great Park and the village road. The first description of the garden occurs in the sale particulars of 1837 which record the improvements made to the site by Thomas Wilson after 1822. The garden was described as having 'a lawn' and 'shrubberies' with a 'fish pond' to the north-west, the pleasure grounds extending up to and around this feature. A title map of 1844 records the garden around the Hall in its present form but gives no detail as to planting. By 1888 a croquet lawn lay on the south of the house with shrubberies to the north and south of the drive. The diarist Kilvert visited in April and June 1870 and noted a steep terraced bank to the road to the south of the croquet lawns. By 1903 the low walled enclosures to the south of the house had been constructed and the planting along the south-west garden boundary and up the west drive established. The terraces Kilvert noticed seem to have been removed by this date. A tennis court had also been constructed on a high level terrace to the north-east of the house and circular flower beds to the south of the main drive. The steep bank to the south of this feature is clearly noted on the second edition Ordnance Survey map. A summer house/pavilion and rock garden, immediately to the east of the house, are even later additions. The number of gardeners employed by the Hall is unknown but it is known that Italian Prisoners of War worked in the gardens during the Second World War. Few changes, apart from a gradual decline, appear to have taken place in the garden

from 1919. The last member of the Chamberlain family encouraged the trees and shrubs to the south of the house to grow up creating even greater privacy. Since moving in, in about 1995, the new owners have created a new formal flower garden partly on the site of the croquet lawn on the south of the house.

The abbey precinct was taken into the garden by Thomas Wilson. When he purchased the estate in about 1822 the area around the abbey contained a rabbit warren and 'a garden', which was probably a simple productive garden, in addition to the monks' fish pond and the abbey ruins. By 1837 he had cleared this area and laid out walks around the pond, ornamental flower beds along the north side of the pond and at least one rustic bridge over the Cwm Hir stream. A second dam/weir was constructed near the confluence of the Cwm Hir stream and the Clywedog between 1844 and 1889. The flower beds are clearly recorded on the 25 in. Ordnance Survey map of 1825. A line of oak and beech trees was also planted along the north of the pond and flanking the north of a track which ran alongside the north of the Abbey connecting the farm with pasture in the east. A group of trees was also planted on the west of the sloping hill. Several of these trees have been lost. It is not clear if the viewing mount dates from this period. The ruins became a popular Picturesque destination and a watercolour of about 1840 shows a milk maid standing in the ruins which are clothed in ivy and creeper. This use of the abbey precinct as pleasure grounds is believed to have lasted until at least 1900. An undated photograph in the church guidebook records a fishing hut on the north bank of the pond but it also records a stock fence just to the north which suggests that the area had already been divided up for grazing. Rhododendrons and laurels on the south bank of the Cwm Hir stream probably date from about 1900. A bridge was recorded over the Cwm Hir weir on the 1903 Ordnance Survey map but no trace of this survives. The cypress wind break to the east of the Abbey is believed to date from about 1960. The function and date of the level terrace above the Abbey is unclear. It has the dimensions of a tennis court but if this is what it was then it dates from after 1903 and was lost before 1960.

The walled kitchen garden lies immediately to the north of the Hall. The garden is irregular in shape, its six boundaries create a northern rectangular area which becomes narrower to the south with short boundaries on the south-west and south-east. Red brick and stone walls surround the garden apart from the south-west boundary which is marked by a length of nineteenth-century low ornamental iron railings with fleur-de-lys detail. The garden covers an area of about 1 1/2 acres on a south-west facing slope. The north and east walls are brick and they are partly capped with stone. The north wall stands between 2-4m high. Against the centre of the south face of the north wall there is a large brick and stone platform which stands about 1m above the level of the garden in the east and 2-3m above it in the west. The platform is about 15m long and it has a projecting central bay. Fourteen dressed stone steps, enclosed by iron railings, connect the south end of this bay with the garden below. The railings continue along the south edge of the platform creating a balustrade. On the platform moulded stone edging survives which illustrates the position of a substantial vine house which had a projecting bay. A dressed stone step survives on the south front of this bay. Iron heating grills and pipes also survive. The brick vine arches are now incorporated into a new, simple vegetable garden, as is the central bay. Traces of whitewash survive on the wall behind. To the east of this platform, in the north-east corner of the garden, the roofline of a curving greenhouse survives in the brick work. To the west of the platform, on the lower level, the footings of another greenhouse survive, standing about 2m out from the wall. A

door in the wall leads through into a single-storey red brick bothy on the north side of the garden. This bothy is now used as an animal shelter. Bricked up doorways and stoke holes occur in the north wall which is studded with nail holes and iron clamps.

The east wall of the garden stands to about 1.5m high. It collapsed in a storm during the 1970s and was only partly rebuilt. The remaining bricks lie in the coppice woodland to the east. A simple entrance into the kitchen garden is sited near the north-east corner. This was remodelled during the rebuilding and now contains a modern farm gate. About 10m south-west of the gate there is a raised, circular brick water tank. The west and south-west walls of the garden are stone with a red brick skin. The west wall is supported on the west side by a line of brick buttresses. The west wall descends the slope of the garden in a series of steps. Two overgrown trained fruit trees survive against the wall in the north-west. On the south-west wall a pointed-arch gateway leads from the service drive into the garden. It contains an iron gate which leads through to a set of stone steps which ascends to the garden level. The north side of the service buildings of the house create the south garden wall. Between the west end of the buildings and the south-west corner of the garden there is a short length of wire fencing. Just to the north of this boundary there is a small raised and unfenced area of soft fruit.

The centre of the garden is now pasture. A slight depression runs down the centre of the area from north to south showing the line of an old path. Sheep, a pony and a donkey graze in the garden area. On the north face of the north wall there are two brick bothies with slate roofs and Gothick windows. The western bothy is now a stable/animal shelter, the eastern a store shed. The service drive runs between the bothies and a two-storey slate roof rendered building to the north. This was a squash court. It was built in about 1920 and it still contains a gallery. It is now used to raise pigs. About 10m to the north-east of the garden is the garden cottage. This is a small two-storey brick house with a slate hung west face. It is also roofed in slate and has a central porch on its south front. A small area of hedge enclosed garden lies to the south and west of the house. To the west, between the squash court and the cottage, there is a work yard and chicken run. Some large beech grow in this area.

The kitchen garden dates from at least 1844 when it appeared on a tithe map. It was probably built by Thomas Wilson from 1822. By 1888 the garden contained the north platform and greenhouses and the central area was divided into four quarters. In the sale catalogue of 1919 the garden was recorded as containing a heated peach house, melon house, and three vineries along the south-facing north wall on either side of projecting conservatory, which was also heated. In addition there was a further unheated peach house, a cucumber house, a mushroom house and a free-standing greenhouse. Vegetable stores and cold frames lay out side the garden to the north. The vine house on the centre of the south-facing wall and a peach house, in the north-east corner survived until the mid-1970s. Box hedges also ran along the edges of the quarters which were divided by metallised paths. Following general deterioration and storm damage in the 1970s the glasshouses and garden were dismantled. The garden was ploughed up and rented out for grazing. The squash court, yard and gardener's cottage passed out of the ownership of the Hall by about 1990.

Sources

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