

BRYN EISTEDDFOD

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 8 (CON)
OS Map	116
Grid Ref	SH 808 769
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Conwy
Community Council	Llansantffraid

Designations Listed buildings (all Grade II): house, cottage and garden walls, stable range, stone and brick cart sheds, kitchen garden walls and glasshouses, lodges, Bwythyn-y-Bryn and garages, bridge carrying drive over road; Tree preservation order: covers trees alongside north drive and by lodge (plus wood on hill above).

Site Evaluation **Grade II***

Primary reasons for grading Well preserved eighteenth-century formal garden and nineteenth-century walled kitchen garden with woodland and outstanding views; long carriage drive between two lodges.

Type of Site Formal garden, kitchen garden, woodland walk.

Main Phases of Construction 1760 -76; 1830-41.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Bryn Eisteddfod occupies an elevated site on the east side of the Conwy valley, overlooking the Conwy estuary and the town and castle of Conwy. The name, adopted in the eighteenth century, arises from supposed druidic connections of the site. Part of the seventeenth-century house belonging to the Roberts family survives nearby, just to the north of the present house.

The main house was originally a single rectangular block, built in the 1760s by Canon John Jones, a cousin of the Roberts family, who took a 99-year lease of the estate. The house was oriented to make the most of the view and has a large bay at the western end to enable this to be appreciated. It was doubled in size and made L-shaped by the Venerable Hugh Chambres Jones, grandson of John Jones and eventual purchaser of the estate, in the 1830s, by the addition of a new wing of the same size at right angles to the original house. This faces the view down the Conwy valley, thus bringing both of the main views from the site into the house. The main entrance to and focal point of the house is now in the right-angle between the two wings.

The house was also stuccoed and remodelled in the 1830s in a plain style with Tudor influences; the architect was Richard Cash of Liverpool, whose plans and elevation drawings survive. There is a 1920s porch by S. Colwyn Ffoulkes of Colwyn Bay in the angle between the two wings, and further additions at the back, some also by Ffoulkes and some of about 1890. The house has an underground passage leading across the front, from the corner of the formal garden to the corner of the west (original) wing, which serves to ventilate the cellars. The older part of the house is of brick and the later wing stone, with slate roofs. There are two storeys plus attics, and a basement at the rear. The windows are sashes and there are decorative bargeboards. The porch is mainly glazed.

Part of the old house of the mid to late seventeenth century survives to the north of the main house, and is now called Bwythyn-y-Bryn; it was known as Pen-y-Bryn until the present house was built. It may stand on the site of an earlier (medieval) house. It was occupied until the later house was built and then became domestic offices; when the Ven. Chambres Jones enlarged the main house in the 1830s he also made external alterations to Bwythyn-y-Bryn in a similar style. In 1912 a double garage extension was added, and the old house is now again in domestic occupation.

Bwythyn-y-Bryn is stone-built with a slate roof and brick chimneys. It retains some mullioned windows in the upper storey, which probably relate to the 1830s alterations, although the lower floor has been much altered and most of the windows are modern. The garage wing is also of stone and slate, with two large entrances with double wooden doors.

The Mews Cottage, a stone building, formerly a barn, adjoins the formal garden, its gable end forming part of the garden wall. There is no visible join and this wall is therefore likely to be contemporary with the barn, which is probably the building shown adjoining the garden on the 1776 estate map. The entrance to the formal garden from the yard is immediately next to the cottage, and behind it is a small cobbled courtyard with outbuildings.

Two slate-roofed stone buildings lie in a small paddock between the house and the road. The one nearer the house, which is L-shaped, has a large arch in its back wall, and stable doors; it was the coach house and stable range, and some stalls survive inside. The other has a wide opening in the front and was probably a cart shed. Neither building is shown on estate maps of 1776 or 1792, and they are likely to date from the period of improvements in the 1830s. There are other small, apparently later, buildings in the paddock, including a brick lean-to against the outside of the north-east garden wall.

A brick building with a stone extension and slate roof, north of the original house (Bwythyn-y-Bryn), on the far side of the branch off the drive leading east into the yard behind the main house, has a large doorway and was probably a cart shed. It was built between 1776 and 1792, although the stone extension is later. This is dated 1872 and is used as a tractor shed.

The garden occupies a sloping site on the east side of the Conwy valley, with extensive views to south and west. The house is situated at the north-east end of the site, with the kitchen and formal gardens behind, and the lawn and woodlands stretching away to the south-west, into the

view, which has been a guiding principle in the laying out of the grounds, both contemporary and later. An estate plan of 1776 shows the main elements of the garden much as they are today, with a large area to the south-west of the house partly planted with trees but partly open to the view (terminating where the ha-ha now is), a walled garden east of the house, and woodland (less extensive than at present) south and west of this. The kitchen garden and drives are not shown.

The square walled garden appears larger on this map than at present, extending further to the north-east, but this seems to be nothing more than an inaccuracy on the part of the map-maker. It is likely that the garden walls date from the eighteenth century, and were constructed, and the garden laid out, by Canon John Jones, builder of the 1760s house. No sign of any earlier garden associated with the seventeenth-century house now remains, however, so there is a possibility that the walled garden may go back further in origin.

The present layout of the walled garden, with box parterres and hedges, probably dates from early in the twentieth century rather than the eighteenth, and has been recently restored; although a change of use might be expected following construction of the large kitchen garden to the north in the first half of the nineteenth century, the path layout was different from today's in 1890 and the layout of the parterres therefore cannot have been the same at that time.

The walled garden slopes up towards the south-east, is stone-walled on all sides, and has gravelled perimeter and cross paths dividing it into quarters, with borders round the outside. There are entrances in the south corner, through the north-east wall and near the middle of the north-west wall (on which the cross-path is aligned), all with doors. Rose beds and pergolas flank the central north-west to south-east path and the northern half of the north-east to south-west path. The south quadrant contains a well which was once the sole source of water for house and garden. A modern summer house and seats have been added.

John Jones' son, John Chambres Jones, seems to have made few improvements to the property (which was still leased), but his son the Ven. Hugh Chambres Jones, who eventually bought the freehold, made many improvements when he took over the estate in the 1830s, although he did not become the owner for another thirty years. The large walled kitchen garden dates from about 1841 and probably initiated the change from practical to ornamental use for the walled garden.

To the south-west of the house is the main lawn, terminating in a ha-ha. The croquet lawn, formerly a bowling green, which has been levelled slightly, forms part of the lawn, with no formal distinction. There is a former tennis court at the south-west corner of the lawn, which has been levelled, creating low grass terraces. The ha-ha, a straight wall without a ditch, forms the south-western boundary of the garden. It extends from the edge of the woodland to the east to the branch off the southern drive which runs along the north-west edge of the nursery garden, a rectangular area bounded by a tall hedge. At its north-western end the ha-ha forms the south-west boundary of this garden, but as a free-standing wall. The south-west corner of the lawn appears to be banked up slightly to keep level with the top of the wall, but falls away into the tennis court.

Interestingly, on the 1776 map a small enclosure on the site of the present nursery garden is named as 'part of Cae Glas', but is shown as cut off from Cae Glas, the field beyond the ha-ha, by a straight line on the line of the present ha-ha. This may be a hint that the ha-ha is an early feature, original to the eighteenth-century garden, but if not the most likely period for its construction is during the 1830s, when the new wing of the house was built looking out over it.

The construction of the new drives was apparently in response to the change from using light carriages drawn by two horses to large coaches drawn by four. These more cumbersome vehicles could not negotiate the sharp turn into the original drive from the lane on the north-east (now once again the main entrance), and another entrance was created which was easier of access for them. However, there was also clearly a wish to make the journey up to the house an enjoyable experience, and to impress.

Two new drives were in fact constructed, one to the north-east and one to the south-west, meeting and entering the grounds just to the north-west of the house. A map of about 1820 shows a track leading off to the south-west which then turns back on itself and joins the main road almost due west of the house. There was no track in this position in the eighteenth century, but by 1840-41, when the Ordnance Survey 1-in. first edition was published, it had been re-routed and become the southern drive, although the lodge is not shown at this date, nor the northern drive. The 1820 map was made from the original survey for the 1840 one, and the last revision must have been made before 1833 when the lodges were built.

The northern drive has an avenue of mixed hardwoods, now very impressive despite the loss of some of the trees (elms), which eventually blends into woodland where the slope becomes steeper. The drive crosses the lane on a large stone bridge, built in 1841, and skirts the kitchen garden, which is probably roughly contemporary with the bridge.

Apart from re-used materials, nothing is left of a lodge, which formerly stood by the kitchen garden. This may have been very short-lived, as it probably relates to the period of less than ten years when the north drive crossed the road and entered the grounds at this point, before the bridge which now carries it over the road was built. The northern and southern lodges, built in 1833, survive. They are L-shaped and single-storey, built of random stone with dressed stone window and door surrounds and slate roofs, in a mock-Tudor style with mullioned windows, tall chimneys and pointed gables. Both lodges retain their simple one-piece stone gateposts with pointed tops, similar to those on the garden entrance from the drive, but both gates are modern. There is no gate in the garden entrance.

Where the drives pass in front of the house, a revetting wall on the garden side creates much the same effect as the ha-ha - the view from the house towards Conwy is not interrupted by the drive or the fence below it. There was until recently a large beech within the garden which obscured this view, but it has fallen and the view is now fully opened up.

When the Ven. Hugh Chambres Jones died in 1869 he left Bryn Eisteddfod to his wife's sister's nephew by marriage, who was also his mother's great-nephew, Hugh Maurice Jones.

However, he left a life interest in the property to his own half-sister, Margaret Grace Jones, who lived to be nearly 100 and deprived Hugh Maurice of his inheritance, as he pre-deceased her. Hugh Maurice's son, Wilson Cuthbert Bevan Jones-Mortimer, therefore inherited when she eventually died, in 1902. The Jones-Mortimers later sold Bryn Eisteddfod and in the 1920s it belonged to an Edward Blackburn who made some alterations to the house and initiated an arboretum; the present owner continues the tradition of garden improvements.

From the south wing of the house the view across the croquet lawn and ha-ha of the Conway valley and the mountains beyond is exceptional, and is drawn into the garden by the framework of plantations to right and left. Both these areas were planted by 1776, but have been added to, thinned and altered since. A small enclosure to the south-west, now used as a nursery, was part of a field in 1776, but having been cut off by the ha-ha eventually received a tall beech hedge and some formal paths with box edging. More or less due south of the house, part of the eastern plantation has been cleared and is now maintained as a wild flower meadow. A group of oaks here probably remains from the eighteenth-century plantings. The eastern limit of the eastern plantation has moved further up the hillside, and a long vista has recently been made just within this boundary, incorporating a young laburnum arch. In the 1920s the northern part of this area was developed as the arboretum, more than twenty species of exotic conifers being planted and most of the existing hardwoods removed. However, a large horse chestnut and a sycamore survived, the latter now being one of the largest of this species in Britain.

The almost square kitchen garden, which lies immediately to the north of the house, beyond the rear courtyard, has two stone walls, one of hand-made brick throughout, and one of brick-lined stone. The former are on the south-east and south-west, the brick wall is on the north-east and the brick-lined one on the north-west. The south-east wall, which has a central doorway, may date from the eighteenth century as it runs alongside the old entrance drive, although it is likely to have been altered, if not rebuilt, when the garden was made. The brick wall on the lane side is taller than the stone walls (up to 4 m) with a slate coping. The north-west, brick-lined, wall, along the 'new' drive side, changes in height in the middle, the south-western half being the same height as the stone south-west wall (about 3 m), and the rest similar to the brick wall. The door through this wall has a dressed stone surround on the outside, and just round the corner, on the lane side (the stone exterior continues for a short distance round this corner), is a slit window with a similar surround.

This area, near the north corner, is where the demolished lodge once stood, and it appears that the stone from the lodge, including the door surround, was used for the northern end of the north-west wall, and was then lined with the warmer brick. This suggests that the garden was constructed at about the same time as the bridge was built and the lodge thus made redundant, 1841. The only enclosures shown in this area on the 1776 estate map were a very tiny square one, apparently too small to be a garden enclosure, near the south corner of the present garden and close to the seventeenth-century house, and two slightly larger ones to the north-east. One of these contained trees and may have been an orchard; this falls within the area of the present garden, but the other lay partly within and partly outside this area. None appears to bear any direct relation to the present enclosure.

There are no doors in the south-west and north-east walls. The garden is not level, although some levelling has certainly been carried out; the south corner contains an outcrop of rock which obviously could not be levelled or made productive, and it has therefore been cut off diagonally with a stone retaining wall. Attempts to make this area into a rockery have been unsuccessful, and the stone has now been collected and made into a length of rough wall on the top. There are some ornamental shrubs and trees, including yews which may once have been clipped. Among the thickest growth is a derelict former generator house.

A raised border runs along the bottom of the diagonal wall, with a slate water tank in the middle of it (now used decoratively). A grassed-over path runs along next to the border, and can be seen in the grass of the orchard area turning north-west to meet the path running along inside the north-west wall. A parallel path marked on the 1890 map cannot be seen so easily. The other paths, around the edges and criss-crossing the middle of the garden, are still in use, mostly gravelled. Several are edged with dwarf box hedging.

The western area of the garden contains small fruit trees, not particularly old, and the rest of it is used for fruit cages and vegetable plots. The north-west wall has espalier pears trained on it, some probably original, including several old varieties. The eastern part of the north-east wall supports more pears and some cherries.

The glasshouses and sheds are in the northern corner. They face south-east and are shown on the 1890 map. There are several free-standing buildings, in varying states of repair. The southernmost was a greenhouse with a boiler house behind, but this blew down (the brick base and back wall and the boiler house remain). Half of it has now been reconstructed using polythene sheeting. The large heating pipes are still in situ. A small melon house next to this has raised beds and visible heating pipes; there are frames in front of it with heating pipes running along the back wall. A spacious vine house with potting sheds behind still contains vines, at least one possibly original, and retains the rods and window opening devices, repainted in their original mid-green, and in use. This house has been restored, although there is now no heating - the old pipes are still in situ, however. The potting sheds, against the wall in the north corner, have very recently been restored from a derelict state. There is a large slate water tank outside the vine house.

A peach house has been added since 1890, facing south-west along the lane wall, and leaving only a narrow gap for access to the potting shed between its north-west part and the end of the vine house. This is in reasonable condition and contains wall-trained peach and nectarine trees, some of the former probably original.

Sources

Primary

Information, including sheet of open-day garden notes, from Dr Michael Senior

Information from Mr R. Idloes Owen and Mr M. Jones-Mortimer

Wood, R., estate map (1776), Dr Senior's collection

Estate map of about 1792, Dr Senior's collection

2-in. manuscript map for Ordnance Survey 1-in 1st edition (c. 1820), University College of North Wales archives, Bangor

Aerial photograph, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

Secondary

MacArthur, W., *The River Conway* (1952)