

## **INSOLE COURT**

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| <b>Ref number</b>        | <b>PGW (Gm) 27 (CDF)</b>   |
| <b>OS Map</b>            | 171  |
| <b>Grid ref</b>          | ST 153 778   |
| <b>Former county</b>     | South Glamorgan  |
| <b>Unitary authority</b> | The City and County of Cardiff   |
| <b>Community council</b> | Llandaff   |
| <b>Designations</b>      | Listed buildings: Llandaff Court (Insole Court)<br>Grade II*; Terrace wall in garden Grade II<br>Conservation Area: Insole Court |

**Site evaluation** **Grade II\***

**Primary reasons for grading** The survival of a grand Victorian and Edwardian town garden, with fine terracing and balustrading, reflecting the owners' passion for horticulture. The garden features extensive rockwork which was introduced as a habitat for Violet Insole's collection of alpinists and rock plants. The garden still contains a wide variety of ornamental trees and shrubs, although Violet's alpinists and irises, on which she was an expert, have mostly gone.

**Type of site** Formal garden; informal rockeries and water garden; former kitchen garden

**Main phases of construction** 1860s; late nineteenth-early twentieth century

### **Site description**

Insole Court is a large, stone built Victorian mansion situated on the western side of Llandaff, to the south of Fairwater Road. It is a two-storey building in romantic gothic style, with a main east-west block and two wings running northwards from the east end. It has mullioned and transomed windows, gothic arched windows, steeply pitched slate roof, projecting gables, splayed bays, clustered 'Tudor' chimneys, pierced balustrading along the eaves and a tall, slender, battlemented tower in the centre of the north side of the main block. The entrance is through a single-storey porte-cochère at the west end of the north front. A small semi-octagonal conservatory projects from the west front. The interior is richly decorated with carved and painted flowers and animals. One interesting feature of the interior, now gone, was an indoor rock garden, probably for ferns, set in a glassed in archway under the stairs.

Insole Court was built by James Harvey Insole (1821-1901), coal owner and shipper, whose father George Insole was a pioneer of the coal trade and director and promoter of the Taff Vale Railway. In 1855 James Insole bought a plot in Llandaff, appointed Messrs Habershon as his architects and built a modest house, then known

as Ely Court. A lodge for the coachman was built at the entrance. Business flourished and by 1874 James was spending large sums on improving the house. The architect for the transformation of the house in the gothic style of William Burges was a local man, George Robinson. His assistant Edwin Seward, by then a partner in the firm James, Seward and Thomas, made further additions by 1878. The north wing, tower and porte-cochère were added. By 1882 the house was described as 'the leading residence of the locality'.

In 1906-09 James Harvey's son George altered the house, bringing the interior up to date and building a large new service wing. A porte-cochère was added to the entrance and the name of the house was changed to 'The Court'. The family's fortunes declined after the First World War and in 1932 the house and 57 acres were compulsorily purchased by Cardiff Corporation to make way for new roads and housing estates. Members of the family continued to live in the house until 1938. The house then became known as Insole Court. After the Second World War the house became a library (closed in the late 1970s) and community centre.

The stables and coach house form a single range of one- and two-storey buildings on the north side of a rectangular yard to the north-north-east of the house. The range is higher at each end, with a clock tower at the west end. The yard is bounded on the west by a high curving stone wall, with an entrance in the south-west corner flanked by square piers. Along the south side is a range of single-storey potting sheds, and on the east side is a garage with a glasshouse attached to its southern end. To the north, against the east boundary, is a modern utilitarian outbuilding. The buildings are all of stone with pitched slate roofs, in the same style as the house. The stables and coach house, building on the east side of the yard (later the garage), and building to the north were in existence by 1874, the potting shed range by 1915.

The gardens of Insole Court occupy a roughly rectangular area between Fairwater Road in the north and Vaughan Avenue in the south. The house lies towards the southern end, with the area to the north of it narrower than that to the south. The ground slopes gently towards the south, and the main area of the garden south of the house is terraced.

The main entrance is at the north end, off the Fairwater Road. The garden is bounded here by a low stone wall topped with iron railings. The entrance is flanked by octagonal piers with conical tops. On the east side is a small two-storey gothic lodge of stone with a steeply pitched slate roof. A tarmac drive flanked by mature horse chestnuts curves gently down to a level rectangular forecourt in front of the house. This is now partly built on by modern brick garages. The drive runs through a lawned area bounded on the east by mixed ornamental trees at the north end, including conifers, eucalyptus and palms and then by a yew hedge. A row of pines run along the east boundary just beyond the boundary wall. On the west there are evergreen shrubs and a row of pines along the boundary. On the south-west side of the forecourt are a large copper beech and a large sycamore.

A second drive, now disused, winds from the south-west corner of the grounds to the west side of the forecourt. It is tarmac, with simple iron gates at the entrance, and is flanked by trees and shrubs, including limes, rhododendrons and a row of Irish yews. At the north end it is flanked by pines and by rectangular polychrome stone piers with gothic carved caps topped by heraldic mythical beasts holding shields carved in stone. Beyond these are low curving stone walls carrying the drive over a small ravine. At their eastern ends are sockets in the coping indicating further missing

statuary. On the south side flights of steps lead down to two earthen paths through an informal area of bamboos and hydrangeas.

To the north of the forecourt is a sloping lawn up to a low stone wall that encloses a narrow grass terrace against a high brick wall, formerly the south wall of the kitchen garden. A narrow border filled with fuchsias runs along its foot. At the east end of the terrace is an area of massive slabs of rock piled up to form a high 'wall' with 'natural' horizontal strata. A yew tree grows on top of the northern end. A narrow tunnel leads through to the yard to the east.

The main area of the garden lies to the south of the house. This is entered through an iron gate on the west side of the house which leads to a tarmac terrace bounded on the west by heavy gothic balustrading of dressed sandstone. The piers are circular, with trefoil arches between them and with moulded coping. At each end are square piers with trefoil carving and topped by splayed stone vases. Curved coping beyond the piers leads down to low piers topped with similar vases.

A tarmac terrace runs along the south front of the garden, with stone paving against the east half of the house marking the position of two former conservatories. Against the house are two large *Magnolia grandiflora*. Below the terrace is a large sunken rectangular lawn bounded on the north and east sides by double grass scarps. A double flight of stone steps, with recumbent terracotta lions on low piers on either side at the top, leads down from the middle of the terrace to a central random paved path across the lawn, in the centre of which the path divides around a small circular stone-edged flowerbed. Two arched flowerbeds lie to the east and west of this and in each corner is a curving triangular flowerbed. The lawn is bounded on the south side by a random stone paved path and heavy stone balustrading. This is similar to the balustrading on the west terrace, but more elaborate, with balls around the arches and a different plant carved in each spandrel. The piers are also topped by splayed stone vases. In the centre is a wide flight of steps down to a semi-circular paved area. The steps are flanked by low parapets and low square piers. On the west side the paved path continues to a projecting bastion overlooking the west lawn below and then continues northwards as a gravel path. The semi-octagonal bastion is bounded by a low parapet wall topped with cinquefoil pierced balustrading. This stands on a stone revetment wall with a band of blind trefoil arches around the top and animals carved on the top of the corners below it. Stone piers topped with vases flank flights of steps on the south side of the bastion which lead down to a gravel path along the foot of the terrace wall. The steps are flanked by large water-worn limestone slabs. A further flight of stone steps flanked by vases on piers leads down from the middle of the lawn.

The west lawn is ornamented with specimen trees towards its west side, with a large copper beech in the south-west corner and a magnolia at the north end. To its north is a shrubbery area with winding paths leading to the steps up to the drive. In the north-west corner of the lawn is an octagonal summerhouse built of large water-worn stones with rough red sandstone dressings. It has a conical roof and is built on a raised platform set with large rounded stones in the beds and edging the path around it. There are three arched windows and a blocked door on the south-east side with steps leading up to it. To the south-west are three square stone piers in a row to which is attached an arched framework of slender ironwork resting on three slim uprights opposite the stone ones. Behind, to the north-east, is a large sycamore.

Below the main lawn is a long rectangular lawn bounded on the south and east sides by yew hedges. Near its north side are two large cedars, and there is a bank of evergreen shrubs along the foot of the revetment wall of the main terrace.

To the south of this lawn is a narrow gently sloping strip of lawn with a wavy-edged bed along its north side and a copper beech tree on a low mound at its east end. To the south a large rockwork area with an artificial stream runs east-west across the garden. At its west end large slabs of rockwork form a rough wall. This has a gap entrance towards the north end, with a seedling ash growing in it. Shrubs and bamboos are planted around the rockwork. The stream runs in a narrow stone-lined channel from east to west. At present there is no water. At intervals it widens into small pools, and there are small cascades. At the west end is an exit pipe. The ground slopes up on either side and is ornamented with slabs of rockwork. A gravel path winds through the area, and there are some narrow paths of natural stone slabs. Planting is mainly of mixed trees, shrubs, including acers, some ferns and some bamboos. Towards the east end the ground rises and there are two small pools, the lower with an island of rocks and the higher with a broken sluice and a smaller channel inserted into the middle of its floor. Above is a rockwork wall and a higher rockery area with narrow stone paths, planted with coniferous shrubs, acers and bamboos. A gravel path runs around it, with a further rockwork bed to the east, and links up with the path to the east of the main lawn.

Along the south side of the garden, to the south of the rockwork area, is a lawn dotted with mature deciduous trees including sweet chestnuts. The garden is bounded here by a low hedge. To the east of the main lawn a gravel path runs along the top of the scarps, with flights of steps down to the east-west path along its south side. The steps are flanked by balustrading and piers topped with vases except at the lower level, where one is missing. The gravel path is flanked by rockwork on the west and by birch and maple trees on the east in a rockwork-revetted bed, at the south end of which is a short wall.

At the east end of the terrace against the south front of the house is an opening on to a large square lawn, the former bowling green, to the south-east of the house. On its north side it is bounded by a grass scarp and a beech hedge. A tarmac path leads along the north side to concrete steps at the east end to a pedestrian exit to the garden. The east side is bounded by a belt of trees and shrubs in front of which is a former wide walk, now of earth. On the south side the lawn is bounded by a parapet wall punctuated by four stepped up sections topped with iron bolts that probably originally held stone vases. The bases of two stone vases survive. In the centre a flight of stone steps leads down to a lower lawn. It is flanked by square stone piers with banded carving and swags under the capping, and round-arched balustrading. The piers are topped by large ball finials. At the foot of the wall on either side of the steps are curving stone seats with lion arm rests. A magnolia tree is planted on either side of the foot of the steps, and a box-edged bed planted with mixed shrubs runs along the foot of the revetment wall. In front is a narrow gravel path. The lawn has a large circular flowerbed in the centre with a modern ornament in the middle. The south and east sides of the lawn are bounded with gravel paths and borders of trees and shrubs.

To the east of the house, above the bowling green, steps lead up to a neglected and overgrown level area with a low stone wall around its central raised part, reached by stone steps flanked by low piers. This area is now overgrown with seedling trees and has two tanks in it. A path leads along its west side to a gate into the forecourt.

The former kitchen garden occupies the north-east section of the garden, bounded on the west by a yew hedge screening it from the drive, on the north by conifers and other trees and shrubs, on the east by the garden boundary wall and on the south by a high brick and stone wall. The gently sloping rectangular area is now

laid out as a formal rose garden, with rose beds cut into a lawn, and with a gravel path around the south and east sides.

The gardens were initially laid out for James Harvey Insole during the early 1860s: £54 was paid to the Cardiff nurseryman Mr Treseder for laying out a pleasure garden (1860-64 ledgers), and in 1861 Treseder planted the avenue of horse chestnut trees. By this time there were already new entrance gates and balustrading flanking the drive. Harvey bought further land in the 1870s and 80s, enabling him to extend the gardens. The first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1874 shows the house, then called Ely Court, and its gardens surrounded by a small park on the south, west and north sides. A long drive led southwards to a lodge on what is now Ely Road. The park was planted with individual trees, small clumps and perimeter belts of trees. The layout of the garden differed slightly from that at present in that the main terrace appears not to have been quite rectangular, there was a circular structure on a mound to its south, the rockwork water garden was not yet in existence (the garden terminated just south of the mound), and to the east of the house was one long rectangular area with a fountain in the middle (where there are now two terraces). The garden is shown as having fewer areas of lawn than at present: it is all planted with trees and shrubs except the main terrace and a rectangular lawn to the west. The summerhouse is shown in its present position. Where the rockwork north of the house is now situated there are several glasshouses.

A description of the garden in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* for 20 May 1882 makes it clear that the garden was well planted with many specimen trees and shrubs, some of which remain. There were collections of over fifty camellias, rhododendrons, azaleas, ericas and alpines. By this time the rockwork north of the house was in place: 'large masses of natural rock brought from some distance, to a height of 30 feet'. A collection of rock and alpine plants was planted on it. There was a well stocked conservatory on the south of the house, and the terrace around the house was of gravel and grass. The trelliswork to the west of the house was covered in roses and clematis, and the surrounding shrubbery was planted with rhododendrons, conifers and other shrubs. The nearby lawn was a 'tennis-ground'. The rockwork water garden to the south was 'a recent addition ... taken from the park'. It had a pool at the lower end, where it terminated with a 'rocky grotto'. The gardener, Mr Julien, appears to have laid it out personally, supervising 'the placing of every stone'. The planting was not yet completed at that stage.

Further changes had taken place by 1915 (Ordnance Survey map). The garden to the east of the house had been divided into two terraces, the upper the bowling green and the lower a further tennis court. A small enclosed garden has appeared south of the main terrace, and a vinery surrounded by flower beds and further glasshouses have been built to the north-east of the house in the area that is now overgrown. The rockwork north of the house, installed in 1898, is now shown, with a glasshouse (the peach shelter) against the wall to its west. In front was an area that became a rose garden backed by a rockery. The main terrace appears more in its present form.

During the Edwardian period the garden achieved national horticultural recognition for its collections of alpines and irises. These were the work of Violet Insole (1884-1933), who was one of the leading experts on irises and developed several new strains at Insole Court (Golden Flare, Dog Rose and Trigo). The irises were planted in two irregular beds near the copper beech south of the house, and seedlings were planted in a 'sunk lawn' which had formerly been a croquet lawn

(probably the lower terrace to the south-east of the house). She also had a very extensive collection of alpines which were planted in the rockwork.

Soon after the property, then known as The Court, was bought by the Corporation in 1932 the park disappeared under housing. The south drive was truncated, and the garden was terminated on the south by Vaughan Avenue. Within the garden the small compartment south of the main terrace was enlarged to run the whole length of the terrace, the tennis court lawn to the west was made more informal (and the tennis court probably removed), and the peach shelter was removed. Since that time all the glasshouses have gone except the ruined one to the east of the potting sheds. Of the conservatory against the house only the iron framework remains. The stream in the water garden appears to have undergone some subsequent alteration, with a small channel being introduced into its floor and the pond at its western end being reduced. The kitchen garden to the east of the north drive was converted into the present ornamental rose garden.

## **Sources**

### **Primary**

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### **Secondary**

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