

REPORT ON THE BANGOR SUMMER MEETING 29 June-4 July 2025: HOUSES AND GARDENS OF NORTH WALES

Sunday 29 June



After assembling at 1PM at Bar Uno and accessing our rooms in Idwal, one of the halls of residence on the Bangor University's Friddoedd campus, we took the short bus journey to **Penrhyn Castle**. Skirting the severe castellated bulk of its vast neo-Norman mansion Jo Davidson led us past lawns and specimen trees to the walled flower garden. Here was a theme to be returned to during the week's visits, namely a succession of uses and sometimes wholesale remodelling. This can in some cases be established from earlier plans, such as that of 1768 for Penrhyn, where formal gardens then surrounded

the house. The walled 18th century kitchen garden was replaced by a larger flower garden when the new one was rebuilt. The new walled 19th kitchen garden of some 6 acres lies at a distance from the house and is under productive private ownership.

We then drove to **Treborth Botanic Garden** to be welcomed by members of The Friends who provided tea and cake whilst we listened to a short talk by Sarah Edgar, Chair of the Friends, on the history of this site on the south side of the Menai Straits between the Menai and Britannia bridges. Bought in 1833 by the owner of the Penrhyn Arms Hotel, maps from the 1840s show areas of woodland pasture and meadow. Major changes were planned when the site was acquired by the Chester and Holyhead Railway Company to enhance the approach to the projected Britannia Bridge. At that time an ambitious development of shoreline villas and a large hotel was planned. Equally ambitious was the recruitment of Joseph Paxton, then Head Gardener at Chatsworth, to plan the grounds of 'Britannia Park'. Although Paxton was on site in the 1850s, he was also engaged in other major projects, most notably the Crystal Palace. Most of these ambitious plans were not realised, and the land was bought by Robert Davies MP and then, in 1960, bought by the then University College of North Wales, now Bangor University, for its Botany department. We were shown around by enthusiastic and knowledgeable members of The Friends.



The first lecture of the week was given by Martin Cherry on '*The Early Houses of North Wales and their Setting – some new insights from dendrochronology.*' In a wide-ranging talk he began by showing the dramatic increase in the numbers of late medieval and early modern houses in Wales dated by dendrochronology over the last 30 years or so. Much was due to the dedicated work by volunteers, led by Margaret Dunn, in the North Wales

DOWH group, with the support of Richard Suggett and the Royal Commission and a variety of grant aid, including grants made by the Cambrians. He showed pictures of the exteriors and interiors of houses whose roof timbers had been dated showing that local field work and knowledge could discover 15th century houses 'lurking behind deceptive exteriors'. He was encouraged to see that work was now underway in south Wales. The accepted explanation that there were, so far, no dated houses pre-1400 was that there had been a 'Great Rebuilding' in the 15th century. This was due to the disruption and destruction caused by the Glyn Dŵr Revolt. This explanation is now difficult to sustain as the numbers of dated houses in the early 1400s has increased, many in areas subject to Glyn Dŵr's campaigns. Looking closely at the builders of these houses Martin Cherry detected a strong English influence in styles and techniques and a cadre of Welsh gentry who were Lancastrian supporters and

the backbone of royal and lordly administration in Wales and the Marches. He went on to put forward some challenging ideas on why there were no pre-1400 dated timber houses. It was not so much that they had not survived but rather that they had never existed. The aisled hall – such as that at Rhosyr, Anglesey, excavated and now reconstructed by the National Museum – is seen as the archetypal Welsh princely residence of the 13th century. However, he argued, we should also take into account the sheer number of mottes, castles and tower houses that were the centres of power and elite residences of the Welsh princes and leading *uchelwyr* in the 12th and 13th centuries. The cultural memory of these princely aisled halls persisted even after the Edwardian conquest in architectural traditionalism such as the house at Hafod, Llansilin dated to 1432. Yet Owain Glyn Dŵr's house at Sycharth, lauded by Iolo Goch in the late 14th century, was in essence a motte and bailey.

Monday 30 June

The day's programme began with a visit to **Plas Glynllifon** where Andrew and Jo Davidson gave us a brief overview of the family and estate history and the grandiose construction and ambitious garden and landscaping projects. Our late member Peter Jarvis was especially pleased to have the building containing the historic 1854 De Winton horizontal steam engine and Cornish boiler open to view. The current mansion built in 1836-48 for Lord



Newborough occupies the site of at least three earlier houses of the Glynn and Wynn families. Its post-war history has been chequered, with ambitious projects leading to bankruptcy and numerous changes of ownership. Currently work is underway for a luxury hotel development whilst the vast parkland and some of the outbuildings are owned by Gwynedd County Council. The park, pleasure grounds and gardens cover some 300 ha. Jo Davidson led us on a walk that included several of

the pleasure ground's somewhat idiosyncratic features such as The Children's Boat House. We paused to take the long view from the fountain back to the west side of the mansion now overgrown and blocked off by steel fencing barriers. Extensive use had been made of the Afon Llifon flowing through the park for ornamental features. We ended at the small open-air theatre and examined the pebble mosaic in front of it. Some members then ascended the slopes above the theatre to get an overview of the park.

The next visit provided a complete contrast as our skilled bus driver negotiated narrow roads and squeezed the coach through the arched entry of **Plas Brondanw**. The distinctive turquoise painting



of doors, seats and other features immediately signalled the work of Clough Williams Ellis. He inherited the house in 1908 and set about landscaping the slopes immediately below the house creating compartments bounded by tall hedges and topiary with narrow entrances and exits that frame specific views. Fortunately the weather was fine enough for these vistas over the valley to be appreciated as we ate our packed lunches and explored the intricate design of what is a Grade 1 Listed garden created by Clough Williams Ellis over an extended period from 1908 into the 1960s.

The evening lecture was given by Glynis Shaw who is chairman of the Clwyd Branch of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust and edits the WHGT's Bulletin. Entitled '*The Gardens of North Wales*' Glynis said that her interest in historic gardens had become all-consuming through work on the Cadw Register of Historic Parks and Gardens for Clwyd. She began with the

spectacular 'birds-eye' view painting of 1662 showing the Italianate terraced gardens at Llanerch Hall which have not survived but the successor garden created by Percy Cai in the 20th century contains echoes of that earlier splendour. Turning to a garden to be visited during the week, Glenis said that Gwydir Castle still retained some 16th century features and, remarkably, many fine trees from earlier planting. Pictures and descriptions of houses and gardens too numerous to summarise here followed and a theme that re-occurred was how successor gardens of 18th and 19th century date did not always obliterate earlier features. Houses now containing national collections, such as the orchard and apple collection at Erddig, are essentially recreating the earlier productive parts of 16th and 17th century gardens in a modern idiom.

Tuesday 1st July

Since the programmed visit to Wern Isaf, Llanfairfechan was not possible we headed directly to



Ruthin and met Trustee Fiona Gale, Chair of the Ruthin Castle Conservation Trust, outside the imposing 19th century Ruthin Castle Hotel. This was built in 1826 by Harriet Middleton as a sprawling gothic mansion with gardens, grottoes and water features utilising the ruins of the medieval castle's interior and with walks along parts of its walls and towers. Disentangling Victorian work from medieval has been made more difficult by another major garden reorganisation by Frederick West, (1848-52)

which raised ground levels over parts of the castle interior to create lawns and walks, burying some medieval features. After walking along parts of the western wall-walks we viewed the somewhat neglected, but still visible remains of garden borders and a formal courtyard garden with water features. We then clambered down into the recently conserved remains of one of the Gatehouse chambers. Cadw grants have enabled the Great Gatehouse to be conserved, but more funds are needed to complete the work, to allow for public access. Visiting the site in high summer with burgeoning vegetation growing not just in the gardens but in the walls and towers brought home the urgency, and the daunting scale, of the Trust's aim to stabilise and restore parts of this important medieval castle.

We then walked the short distance to **Nant Clwyd y Dre**, a 15th century timber framed house that



has had a fascinating history of changing use and additions through to modern times. It is now managed by Denbighshire County Council. Several members took a guided tour through the house and its interior rooms, furnished to display the 'seven ages' of the house. We then explored the two gardens which are another remarkable survival. A walled garden to the rear of the house flanked by town buildings and their yards clearly originated as a burgage plot or plots within the medieval borough. Today it is lawned, with borders filled with well-chosen

plants – cheap but effective. A gateway at the end of this garden leads to what has been recreated as a medieval garden and orchard; remarkably this can be firmly identified as the site of the kitchen garden of the medieval castle, 'The Lords Garden' dating from at least Edward 1st reign.



Picnic lunches having been consumed in the garden and the house we then visited **St Dyfnog's Well, Llanrhaeadr**. The church is famous for a complete 'Tree of Jesse' window, dated to 1533. Supposedly taken down and hidden during the Civil War and Protectorate it was put back in 1661. There was considerable discussion on how such a window, with its Marian image, could have survived the Henrician Reformation, and whether there might have been an accompanying window in the nave perhaps of the

crucifixion. Fragments of late medieval and 16th century glass have been set into the west window of the aisle. A stream flows down the north side of the churchyard from a spring that has been a venerated site from early times. Several of the group walked up to St Dyfnog's Well, now on the itinerary of the Cistercian Way long distance trail across Wales. The stone lined tank containing the spring has recently been repaired and excavations have been carried out by a community heritage group.

Our driver's skills were again tested on the drive down narrow lanes to the final visit of the day: **Plas Uchaf, Llancfyllid** where we were met and welcomed by the owners Kerrie and Bleddyn Jackson the sixth generation of sheep farmers at the farm which is overlooked by Moel y Gaer hillfort. They had welcomed the support and interest of the Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group who assisted Kerrie's research into the Wynne family of Caerau who built the house in the late 16th century and added a gabled cross range in the 17th century. By the beginning of the 19th century it had reverted to a tenanted farm. The house and its farmyard buildings and former stable block are all Grade II Listed and we were invited into the house to explore its interior features. Assisted by a Cadw grant in 1979 Kerrie and Bleddyn have worked tirelessly to restore and maintain the house and continue to work on the farm buildings. The biggest surprise however to assembled Cambrians, most of whom had never visited or been aware of the house, was the extensive walled garden attached to the house whose



enclosing walls have now been restored and its interior grid of paths demarcating its six component plots now marked out. Not only is this a remarkable survival from the 16th century but its scale and sophistication emphasise the importance of the house and family. Part of the grant-aided restoration involved clearance and re-instating the farm pond and surveys showed that it had supplied a piped water system (as yet not fully explored) below the garden. This may have supplied a cascade or cascades of water from below the boundary wall

that is partly a terrace due to the sloping ground levels of the garden. The garden, impressive in its size alone, with a possible small banqueting house in one corner of the walled garden and a skilfully engineered ornamental water feature, is further evidence of the sophistication and wealth of the Wynne family in the 16th and 17th centuries displayed in both their house and garden.

In the evening Shaun Evans, Director of The Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates, began his lecture on '*The Houses of the Mostyn family: Ancestry, Inheritance and Gentility in the Welsh Landscape*' with the stark picture of decay of a house and irrelevance of a class in R S Thomas's poem 'Plas Difancoll'. The idea that the Welsh land-owning gentry, especially of the 19th and 20th centuries, had little connection with Welsh cultural identity, was a dominant theme in what Shaun termed the radical, nonconformist tradition of Welsh historical writing. Gentry houses did not qualify for inclusion in Iorwerth Peate's somewhat polemic book *The Welsh House*. The view that the country house was 'in Wales but not part of Wales' contrasted with the English stately homes as quintessentially English. A seminal publication which heralded changing views was Thomas Lloyd's 1986 book *The Lost Houses of Wales* which accompanied the Victoria and Albert Museum's Exhibition 'The Decay of the Country House'. The near-universal decay and destruction of the Welsh country house has particularly in the last quarter of the 20th century, to an extent, been reversed. He cited examples such as Gwydir and Nant Clwyd y Dre. Nevertheless, there are still battles to be fought and historic houses whose survival hangs in the balance, such as Ruperra, Kinnel and Nannau. The twenty houses that, from the mid 16th century to the present, have been owned by the Mostyn family are, he suggested, a good selection to challenge the picture of irrelevance and decay. He dealt in detail with 'The Five Courts of Mostyn': Mostyn, Gloddaith, Pengwern, Trecastell and Tregarnedd. Here, in terms of their bardic celebration and interior decoration and even their plans, it was tradition, lineage and descent that conferred status. He explained how in the 19th century the Mostyn family sought to renew and indeed re-invent stories

of their Welsh history. He ended his talk with an explanation of the aims of ISWE, investigating not only gentry houses and gardens but the impact of these estates in the wider landscape. A final slide on the diverse subjects being investigated by the Institute's current 14 PhD students made the point very well.

Wednesday 2nd July.

The first visit of the day was to **Gwydir Castle**, ancestral home of the Wynns, where we were welcomed by the owners Peter and Judy Welford who have restored both the house and the Grade 1 Listed gardens from near dereliction since their purchase in 1994. We divided into two groups and Peter Welford led us around the exterior of the house and gardens. He began by explaining that Baron Willoughby d'Eresby, who inherited the estate in the 1820s had demolished parts of the enclosing courtyard buildings and range whilst retaining earlier elements of the formal gardens, which were admired for their sophistication by 17th century writers. As an acknowledgement to earlier designs a knot garden in the shape of a Tudor rose was created in the 1820s and has been restored. We were then led along the 'Great Terrace' along the north-eastern side of the house which ends in an ornamental archway (Sir John's Arch) bearing the Wynn coat of arms. We finished on the terrace



overlooking the long sloping lawn of the old 'Dutch' garden which is flanked by two lines of ancient, trimmed yews. In the centre of the lawn an octagonal pool of Victorian date may well have replaced an earlier gravity fed fountain. Peter Welford spoke feelingly of the flooding problems they now face with the lawn often inundated by the River Conwy. We then entered the Lower Hall, part of the original 15th century wing that abuts the castle, for a tour of the interior by Judy Corbet and welcome tea and coffee in the Hall. She explained the original purposes of the first and second floor rooms which they have refurnished in period style since the original furniture all went in the great sale of 1921. Most notable is the dining room created for Sir Richard Wynn in the mid 17th century. Its panelling, dining table and chairs were bought up in 1921 by William Randolph Hearst and on his death stored, never unpacked, in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Tracked down by the Welfords they were returned to Gwydir in 1996. There was sufficient time on our visit for Cambrians to explore the wider grounds with their specimen trees, most important of which are three cedars of Lebanon, survivors of an original twelve planted in 1625.

The afternoon, in continuing good weather, was spent at **Bodnant**, the best-known garden in north Wales, now managed by the National Trust. The gardens and parkland are on too vast a scale to be covered in a single visit so again we were divided into groups or were left to explore individually. One group was led by Glynis Shaw to explore parts of the parkland surrounding the formal gardens. The Dell, Yew Dell and Far End comprise an Arboretum with many native and exotic trees and the magnolias and rhododendrons for which Bodnant is famous.



Jo Davidson led a second group down the successive Edwardian Italianate terraces, two of which contain ornamental ponds, giving a detailed commentary on the planting schemes of the borders. Remedial measures, it is hoped, will preserve one of two now massive cedars either side of one of the ponds to preserve the symmetry of design.

We returned to Bangor in good time to enjoy a wine reception before retiring President Gwilym Hughes handed over the badge of office to incoming President Professor Huw Pryce. He then delivered his Presidential Address *The Age of the Welsh Princes: An Environmental Perspective*.

Thursday 4th July

A special feature of the week's Programme was a visit to **Bodorgan Hall**, rarely open for public visits. We were welcomed by garden staff and the owner, Sir George Meyrick, at the walled kitchen gardens and glasshouses area of the estate. In their heyday in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, these were productive on an almost industrial scale, supplying fruit and vegetables for the house and estate. They were also renowned for producing exotic fruit, notably peaches, melons, nectarines and figs. In the 1850s the head gardener, Charles Ewing, invented the 'glass wall', in essence a long narrow glasshouse for growing peaches and apricots, fruit much appreciated by Owen Fuller Meyrick, a keen plant collector. Sir George outlined the restoration work undertaken to date and the planting and produce plans being developed for the walled gardens today. Re-creation on a Victorian scale would be impossible, nevertheless he was pleased to say that in recent years growing of the white peaches, for which Bodorgan was famous, had been successfully revived, and we were invited to view the peach house. These glasshouses were heated by hot water circulating in iron pipes from a coal fired boiler house. Part of this once extensive system had been brought back into working order and had been 'fired-up' specially for the Cambrians' visit.

We then drove the short distance to Holy Island and to **Penrhos Country Park**, where some sat by the beach to eat their picnic lunch and others of the group were led by Jo Davidson on a walk through the now wooded part of the park. Penrhos was the seat of the Owen family whose heiress married Sir John Thomas Stanley. Their grandson was the Victorian archaeologist – and Cambrian – W.O. Stanley. The estate has in recent years gone through a succession of owners after the 7th Baron Stanley sold up in 1947. Currently there is a planning application to develop it as private holiday lodge accommodation, which would affect the surviving features of the park and gardens, still traceable in the woodland with the aid of the large scale 1900 OS map, not all of which are listed. Not surprisingly the grounds contained a bathing house close to the beach and a boathouse of which only the slipway survives. An unusual structure, the Betting Stand, is a stone tower giving elevated views over a former racecourse.

We ended the day with a visit to **Brynddu** House and Garden and a warm welcome from its owner Robin Grove-White. The present house has a 16th century Tudor wing to which a cross wing was added later in the 16th century and a third wing in the 17th century. We were welcomed inside and members explored the house with Robin Grove-White describing some of its furniture and paintings. He was being careful, he said, not to give details of the successive owners of the estate which would be the subject of his talk later on. The walled garden is a rare survival of the early 17th century. It is still filled with fruit trees and vegetables and flowers. The garden at Brynddu was quite exotic since many foreign plants were brought to it by the son-in-law of one of the 18th century owners who was a professional pirate! Many must have died, but some may have flourished.

Before the final lecture of the week there was a presentation to Jo and Andrew Davidson (that included some treats for their dogs who had been deprived of their owners' company throughout the week!). Hearty thanks were expressed for all their work in organising and guiding throughout the week.

Robin Grove-White then spoke on *The Families and Houses at Brynddu and Plas Coch*. He presented the establishment and growth of the estate in four stages through key marriages in 1310, 1572, 1765 and 1825.



Friday 5th July

At **Plas Newydd** we were met by the Head Gardener Bill Warrell who led the walk down to the gardens. Explaining his planting and management policies he said that the unique importance of Plas

Newydd was its view across the Menai Straits to the mountains of Snowdonia. This was preserved and enhanced by the creation of a natural meadow over the former cricket pitch. One could recognise Ben Warrell's work to the south of the house where his new plantings have more of a sparkle than the older shrubs and you could recognise his work in some of the newer plants in the area to the north of the house as well.

The final visit of the day was to **Plas Cadnant** 'Hidden Gardens'. This small estate and its neglected gardens were acquired by Anthony Tavernor in 1996 who then began the work of restoration, management of the farm and construction of holiday accommodation. He met us on arrival and explained how he continues to maintain and develop the estate and gardens. The gardens today comprise three elements: an upper woodland garden, a walled garden and a secret valley garden on the steep slopes where a stream descends to the Afon Cadnant. That had originally been laid out by John Price, agent to the Marquis of Anglesey, in the first half of the 19th century with plantings of exotic and native trees and rocky outcrops enhanced to create waterfalls. In the 20th century the owners were the Fanning-Evans and it was Mrs Elizabeth Fanning-Evans who created her 'secret garden' in the walled garden. Jo Davidson led us down the steep and twisting paths of the valley garden pointing out exotics and native planting, ferns, mosses and woodland plants. It was hard to



believe that what we were seeing was a massive restoration effort by Anthony Tavernor and helpers, to restore his earlier planting after a massive and disastrous flood on Christmas Day a few years ago which had devastated the valley.

The meeting then concluded at this inspiring site with organisers Andrew and Jo Davidson thanked again for their work in organising a memorable 171st Summer Meeting of the Association. Many Cambrians stayed and had a good lunch in the Cadnant Restaurant.

Heather James and Frances Lynch Llewellyn