

No. 40
Autumn 2005

Gwrych Castle – Forgotten Splendours

by Mark Baker

Gwrych Castle, towering above the busy town of Abergele has been known to travellers for years as they pass along the North Wales coast. Forgotten since the death of the Countess of Dundonald, the last dedicated owner, the gardens have fallen into a sad and sorry state of dereliction.

The gardens were mostly laid out during the 1820s by Lloyd Hesketh Bamford-Hesketh, the owner and part designer of the romantic edifice, and have survived, albeit through the mode of dereliction, untouched. Surrounding the house itself were a series of terraced formal gardens, breaking up the harshness of the embattled walls to allow it to flow into

the picturesque park. To the east of the main house was a gently sloped lawn which was used for parties during the days the Hesketh and Dundonald families were in residence. Open-air concerts were held in the little amphitheatre tower, much to the delight of guests!

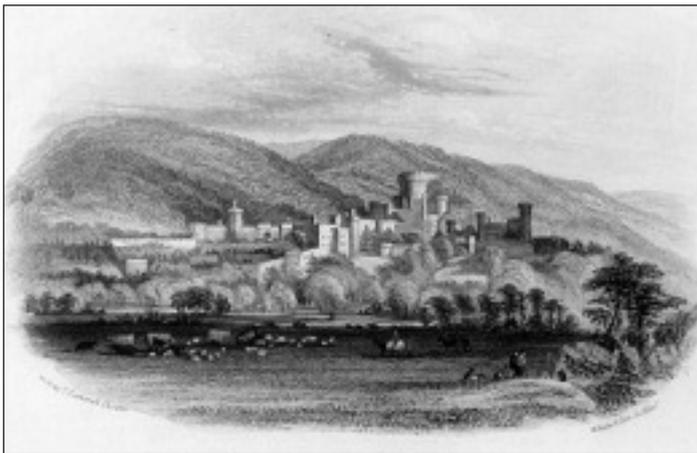
A little further on one would have had to have chosen one of two paths, the lower led to the conservatory, the upper into the charmingly christened Fairy Glen. The conservatory was added in the 1830s by Hesketh and was a 'lean-to' design construction; a magnificent window of cast iron filled with stained glass once overlooked the park and Irish Sea. Today,



© Gwrych Trust

the glassless window and a small tower used for heating the conservatory are the only remains of this delightful structure (as it was demolished in the 1970s to make way for a tilt yard for jousting). A daughter of the Countess of Dundonald's housekeeper recalled the profuse number of geraniums and the heady scent of ornamental roses as one entered the conservatory; she remembered being taken for an audience with the Countess as she sipped tea in this enchanting setting. Surrounding the glasshouse was a parterre laid out formally in the French fashion, with steps and staircases to the side leading up to the yew-lined terraces.

On leaving the formal garden one would have stepped out of the light into the darkness and cool of terraces of the pleasure grounds, which incidentally once formed the driveway for the original Elizabethan house, Y Fron. Monkey-puzzles and laurels now tower above the terraces, interlaced with aged yew trees which form part of an ancient woodland still preserved at Gwrych. Lining all of the winding avenues are crenellated walls, quintessential of the Castell's layout and design, for the Gwrych frontage is over 1500 feet in length. Every tower had a use; today one can see the melon pits and mushroom house cocooned in a huge quadrant of walls, and an icehouse and reservoir hidden in towers on the hillside.



Gwrych Castle; print by Gastineau 1831

One virtually stumbles upon a grove of yews, laid out in a circular fashion, pierced in the middle by two Holm oaks. In the centre is the Grecian temple; this magical spot was created before Mr Hesketh had constructed his gothic palace, as the little marble temple dates back to the eighteenth century. Today the ornamented roof lies on the ground and all around are scattered lumps of stones from the foundations and walls. The Abergele Golf Club borders one side where a couple of yew trees have been felled, but in essence the magic is still there.

Deeper into the park we go, with secret stairways and gateways marking the paths. A bridge of great height traverses the valley of Nant-y-Bella, connecting the Castle's private drive to Abergele. Higher still, up on the hillside is the fallen obelisk that was once the marker for the entrance of the walk to the fernery, aptly called 'The Nest'. On the other side of the park are the cathedral-like Cefn-yr-Ogof caves and the



View from the Hesketh Tower showing the east lawn, Amphitheatre Tower, and paths leading into the gardens

© Mark Baker

Llanddulas and Rhyd-y-Foel SSSI which borders most of the Grade I listed house. On top of the hill to the west of Gwrych is Lady Emily's Tower, a small hunting lodge and observation tower built in the 1830s by the wife of Lloyd Hesketh Bamford-Hesketh. Close by are the sad remains of the gamekeeper's cottage, which up to the 1940s was in use.

Around 270 acres of the 300 acre Gwrych Castle Estate are leased on a 999 year lease to the Forestry Commission. Most of what land is available with the house is terraced garden or of high gradient, and is forever crossed by the outreaching walls of the Castle's façade. In front of the house is a little area of land, which forms part of the essential setting and borders the golf course. Any disturbance to this would be the death knell to the preservation of Grade I house and II* park, as so much of the original park has disappeared.

Today both the house and grounds are derelict, Gwrych is a great safety concern in its current perilous condition. The house is up for sale at £1.5 million but the amount of restoration needed is enormous, more than what was spent at Windsor Castle following the devastating fire. Any enabling development or new build in the grounds would be most disagreeable as there are so few acres left to preserve the setting and any such development would be highly visible.

Let us hope that someone wealthy can come forward and restore one of Wales' premier houses and gardens back to their former glory. However if this does not happen the Gwrych Castle Preservation Trust, 'restorer of the last resort', will be there to act as a safety net. After initiating a feasibility study and options appraisal, we have found that Gwrych can be restored but these costs outweigh any end value. After so many years of neglect, vandalism, and dry rot, this is not surprising. If it is sold to a conscientious and willing restorer it should be guaranteed by the means of a repairs notice from the local authority that the building will be rightly restored and not allowed to crumble into a pile of stones. Let us hope and pray that the saviour of Gwrych is now on the horizon!

www.gwrychtrust.co.uk

Grave Concerns by Jan Toms

Anyone acquiring an old property inherits not only the previous owners' taste in decoration, but possibly the legacy of their pets. Whereas the mortal remains of relatives usually rest in the churchyard, that beloved cat or dog probably ended his days beneath his favourite shrub. Along with mature trees and the occasional rusting seat, miniature headstones or decaying wooden crosses may lurk, as significant as the architectural style of the building. The presence of a dead pet marks forever a piece of history, a moment of loss and sadness in the now departed household.

At Nanteos near Aberystwyth, twenty-three graves record such moments. The death of **Traveller**, "a favourite retriever" acknowledges "that undiscovered Country from whose bourne, no traveller returns." More curious are the graves of **Poor Jack the Coon and Jenny his wife**. Coon being a derogatory word for negro, it has been suggested that they may have been slaves, although as wild animals were kept as pets they could also have been racoons. More likely, as the Welsh word for dog is *cŵn*, the epitaph was probably an all too familiar misspelling.

Those with sufficient money could afford to go to town, as in the case of the Hon. Godfrey Morgan, Lord Tredegar who erected a memorial in the Cedar Garden of Tredegar House near Newport to his horse **Sir Briggs**, ridden at the Charge of the Light Brigade. Sir Briggs died in 1874 but his monument lives on.



Memorial to Sir Briggs

© Jan Toms



© Caroline Palmer

Portmeirion, Sir Clough Williams Ellis' unique 20th century village, inherited two woodland burials, housing the pets of the one-time tenant, Mrs Adelaide Haigh, who died there in 1917. Mrs Haigh's assorted dogs lived in the house where she read sermons to them. Her pet cemetery is still in use.

At Llanychaeron, a fine 18th century building designed by John Nash, one dog memorial remains to posterity - **Vic** who died in 1919. Meanwhile, at Llandudno, the owners of the Bodysgallen Hotel inherited **Funny**, the pet of Mrs Frances Mostyn that died in 1820 ...*the most attached, most intelligent and interesting of four footed friends*. Nearly two centuries later a recent owner of the hotel left behind **Jasper** – *a true friend of noble countenance and most affectionate nature*.

A sad end met the **Tregaron Elephant**, travelling with a menagerie at the turn of the last century. Drinking huge amounts of water poisoned with lead from the surrounding workings, it died and was buried in the Talbot Gardens. A plain stone marks the site of his grave.

Perhaps most famous, and shrouded in legend, is the story of **Gelert** who belonged to Prince Llewelyn. Finding his baby son missing and his dog covered in blood, the prince jumped to the wrong conclusion. Killing Gelert, too late he found the child safely hidden and the body of a wolf slain by his faithful hound. A thirteenth century story, Gelert's grave was marked with commemorative stones and slate tablets in 1802 at the Royal Goat Hotel, Beddgelert - no doubt good for business!

Monuments turn up in many places: a plaque to **Foxhunter** the famous show-jumper is in a car park in the Blorange Mountains, or "*much lamented*" pets such as **Grip** at Chirk Castle at Wrexham. The Bulletin Editor's own garden contains a headstone for her cat, whose life was cut short by the neighbour's car. Her epitaph laments: **Sharon**, *also known as Sister – how we wish the car had missed her*.

Jan Toms writes historical novels at Janet Mary Tomson, published by Robert Hale. Her 10th, *One Small Candle*, appears in September. She has been researching a book into *Animal Graves and Memorials for Shire Books* that will be published in the Spring of 2006. She lives in the Isle of Wight.

PARADISE FOUND

The impressions of a participant in the WHGT Study Day 25 June 2005



© Caroline Palmer

Richard Broyd, Hafod Trust Chairman, and Jennifer Macve, Hafod Trust Administrator and Hafod historian, address fifty members before embarking on the tours

Over the past few years I have been discovering the *picturesque*, visiting such places as Hawkstone, Endsleigh, Downton, Sheringham, and now Hafod the creation of Thomas Johnes Esq.

We arrived on a pleasant day in June, the landscape was lush and green and the air fresh. After assembling in a marquee near to the estate office, our day started with the tour of the former kitchen garden, this being sited a distance from the former mansion on some fertile land near to the river. There are still many features remaining including good walls and a newly-restored glass house, although an area has become a SSSI due to the presence of rare lichens on trees.

After lunch we began our tour of the picturesque grounds. Descending from the estate office and mansion site we embarked on a guided walk down along a path that ran parallel with the river. A steep climb to the left off the main path took us up to the Bedford monument and then Mariamne's garden. This garden being on a rocky outcrop had been very overgrown in the past. It had been cleared a few years ago, but it is growing over again, however, its prospects are very fine, enjoying good views over the surrounding land. Formerly this area had been landscaped and planted as an alpine garden and was only shown to special guests. Descending back to the main path we again passed the Bedford monument. The monument is a classical obelisk dating from 1805, erected to the memory of the Duke of Bedford, a friend of the Johnes family and a fellow 'experimental agriculturalist'.

We continued the walk through pleasant woodland to the site of Pont Newydd, the remains of a former carriage drive bridge. Massive stone abutments still survive; the engineering must have been a huge undertaking when it was constructed. We then crossed the stream over a footbridge across a deep ravine. Along the woodland tracks we eventually came to the 'chain bridge'. This bridge has been reconstructed to its former design using the original cast iron support posts. The river beneath the bridge is very dramatic, the force of the water in the gully below has sculpted the rock in a very unusual manner (an essential location for a photograph). Over the precarious bridge the path then takes us to the ruin of the 'Gothic arcade'. This commands a wonderful location and was probably built as an eye-catcher from the bridge, although its history is uncertain. It is conserved as a ruin as there is insufficient evidence to restore it.

The path continues along its precarious way, winding alongside

the swirling river Ystwyth which has gouged its way through the rocks creating raging torrents. This landscape could have come from a horror film. Eventually the walk becomes less wild and leads to the Dologau bridge, glimpses of the pastoral landscape around can be enjoyed here after the restricted view of the woodland walks. A short walk up through the trees on the right takes us to an old doorway that leads into Mrs Johnes's flower garden. This garden is oval in shape and extends to over an acre. It originally had a small classical summer house with a view to the river. In former times visitors to Hafod followed the path through this garden which provided a stark contrast of formality from the more natural areas outside. However, the area is now overgrown with large trees and unfortunately, the Forestry Commission drove a woodland track straight across the garden. Leaving through the opposite matching doorway we gently ambled along the pathway back up towards the mansion site, marvelling at how it might have looked a century before.

I understand that a great deal of work has been done by the Forestry Commission and the Hafod Trust in restoring the bridges, path and picturesque views. If you find time to discover Hafod, you will be delighted. I look forward to visiting again to explore the many other areas of the historic grounds.

Anthony J Tavernor



The newly-restored chain bridge

© Caroline Palmer

Phoenix Eggs

Yes, it is said that this self-basting bird is just one of its type, and despite the inherent contradiction, has no eggs. Yet we do have them in Wales, perhaps over a hundred, but the trouble is that nobody has admitted publicly how many we have within our borders.

No, this is not the start of an article on fine cuisine, but rather more exciting to my mind, an update on what we are doing about properties at risk in Wales, but bearing in mind that houses and gardens are usually synonymous one with the other.

You may be aware that this was prompted by the disastrous fire last autumn at Hafodunos, near Abergele, and also by the ongoing problems we have at Ruperra Castle, Vaynol, Kinmel, Gwrych, Trawscoed, Nannau etc, etc. This in turn led us to recall that lovely hymn about 'a man that looks on glass... or if he pleaseth through it pass' and in turn to wonder what was beyond, what were the underlying issues!

Yes there is ample evidence to indicate that whilst local authorities (county councils and the like) have the responsibility to safeguard our built heritage they have no obligation to do so, and who can blame them for putting social services etc. as priorities, given that just one property in distress can take millions to sort out. There is also much evidence to suggest that more often than not it is problem owners that are at the root of the problem, not problem properties. Additionally there is massive evidence to indicate a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of those responsible for marketing properties in distress: dumping a fine mansion with extensive historic gardens onto the commercial market together with 'two pubs, three chip shops, and a steel-works' is bound to attract the adventurer/speculator who thinks he has acquired the bargain of the century, only to come back to earth when costs are properly established. The usual reaction is then to do no repairs for years before ultimately putting the property back on the market for double the purchase price, and the whole scenario repeats itself until eventually one is left with a pile of stones just like Edwinston in Carmarthenshire.

Thus it appears to us that the system is sufficiently flawed as to be non-operational – indeed in my view it is probable that the system has never worked, not even since its inception over forty years ago. So what is to be done to find a solution? Yes, I think we can all probably think of something that does not need to involve financial day dreams. Yes too, there is wide acceptance of the considerable community benefits which derive when such properties are up and running and paying their way. But until we can demonstrate



The Chairman, Michael Tree

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something like the true extent of the problem, then I feel that it will be difficult to be taken seriously by those that could come up with a solution with the flourish of a pen.

So the WHGT in conjunction with Mark Baker (Gwrych Castle BTP), and Simon Wardle (Georgian Group) are planning to draw up and publish a book on the historic gardens, houses, and structures which are at risk in Wales, to be published early next year. This will list the majority of such problem properties, and in so doing detail the extent of the problem, plus perhaps a solution as we see it.

Meantime, do let me know of any historic properties of which you feel should be included. This could include any important garden or landscape at risk of being lost to posterity if nothing is done, say, within the next twenty years or so. Building dereliction is usually a good indicator, but simple lack of repair probably is not. But please do not be concerned about raising a false hare – we will look at each and every property before publication, and indeed contact each owner too. So our role or bottom line is to assist in facilitating the flight of a whole clutch of Phoenixes!

Hwyl, pob benthith, oddi wrth Michael Tree, Chairman/Cadeirydd.

Some autumn Events in the Branches

(Remember, members are welcome to join any Branch's activities – just contact that branch!)

BRECON AND RADNORSHIRE

Thursday 20th October 7 pm at The Metropole Hotel, Llandrindod Wells. £6 per head.

Helena Attlee will speak on **The Garden as Unofficial Biographer:** The role of the garden in the social, cultural and economic life of Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries.

CEREDIGION

Sunday 13 November 11.00am

Dr John Savidge will lead an exploration of educational and artistic embellishments in some of the historic woodlands of lower the Ystwyth Valley.

CLWYD

Saturday 22 October at the Edith Bankes Memorial Hall, Northop.
Study Day: **The Planted Landscape** Speakers: Sheila Roberts, David Toyne, Elizabeth Whittle.

GWYNEDD

Thursday 29 September Hotel Maes y Neuadd, **Michaelmas Luncheon.**

PEMBROKESHIRE

Monday 21st November – **Annual Public Lecture** at the County Library, Haverfordwest at 7.30 pm. **Richard Ellis, National Trust Head Warden** for Pembrokeshire will survey NT activity in the Pembrokeshire landscape with particular reference to the ongoing restoration work at Stackpole.

WEST GLAMORGAN

Thursday 6 October 2 pm, at St Paul's Church Parish Centre, Sketty, Swansea.

Gerry Donovan, Restoration Project Manager will talk about **The Restoration of Duffryn.**

ALSO an RHS Lecture, organised by the Builth Wells & District Gardening Club on Tuesday 25th October at 7.30pm at the Wyeside Arts Centre, Builth Wells.

Matthew Biggs "Back Gardens of Britain". RHS members £3, non-members £4, Contact: Sally Pearson 01982- 560796

Contractors start work at Cowbridge Physic Garden



After months of ‘behind the scenes’ negotiations, consultations and meetings the project is at last under way. Work on site began on 1 August and it is anticipated that the first phase of the work will be completed by November.

The immediate task for the contractors, Landcraft Projects, was to demolish a portion of the east wall to enable the diggers and other machinery to gain access to the site, remove tree stumps and other debris remaining from the initial site clearance and begin work on landscaping. A security fence has been erected along the open, west end of the site. It is known that this end of the site was walled in the nineteenth century, and as part of the present project a new wall will be built to enclose the site. Lias limestone, the stone in the surviving three walls and in the wider historic local landscape, will be used. At the time of writing, the footings of the new wall have been laid and stone has arrived on site. The pattern of pathways is now being established, as is the overall layout of the garden. It really is exciting to see plans being realised.

The final design of the garden shows some modifications from the original concept (cf Bulletin No 38). Where it had been envisaged that there would be a central sunken area and a raised ‘viewing mount’, financial and practical considerations for future maintenance have dictated that the garden will now be laid-out on one level. Over the years the garden will, inevitably and appropriately, evolve as some plants flourish and others fail and while essential design will not change, the possibility remains that at some future date a viewing platform could be introduced without affecting that design.

Interest in the project among the residents of Cowbridge has been stimulated by the activity on site since the beginning of August and by publicity in the local press. Members of Cowbridge Camera Club are compiling a photographic record of progress on site, and pupils from Cowbridge Comprehensive School have volunteered to paint a mural/display panel on the perimeter of the site to give passers-by an artist’s impression of the garden. Publicity and fund-raising are, and will remain, matters of priority for the Cowbridge Physic Garden Trust Committee as some of the required match funding for the second phase of the project, which will include the actual planting of the garden, has yet to be raised.

The Trust’s Planting Committee has drawn up preliminary planting lists and these are in process of being finalised prior to placing orders with specialist firms. The garden will be a recreation of an eighteenth-century physic garden and plants will be limited to those in cultivation in this country before 1800... a date which does cause a few headaches when choosing, for example, box which can be vulnerable to disease, or roses which may have a long pedigree and a glorious scent but which succumb readily to blight and wilt. Advice is being sought from experts.

In the next few months the site will be transformed and the garden will really begin to take shape. Further progress will be reported in the next issue of the Bulletin.

Hilary M Thomas

Ruperra Conservation Trust deplores lack of progress

The owner of Ruperra Castle Mr Ashraf Barakat, has withdrawn it from the sale reported in the last edition of the Bulletin, telling a Western Mail reporter in July he would retain the estate even if the three year old planning application proved unsuccessful.

With the castle in a worsening state of decay, Ruperra Conservation Trust, supported by its local Assembly Member, Jeff Cuthbert, first called on Caerphilly County Borough Council to speed up its deliberations in the hope of saving the building from further damage.

Paul Rowlands of the Western Mail spoke to the Chief Planning Officer of the Council who said that they had no plans to interfere with the castle as long as the planning application remained active. He estimated the bill for restoring the landmark would run into millions of pounds and said, "While there's a realistic prospect of a substantial private sector investment in the site, it would be frivolous of the council to throw public money at it."

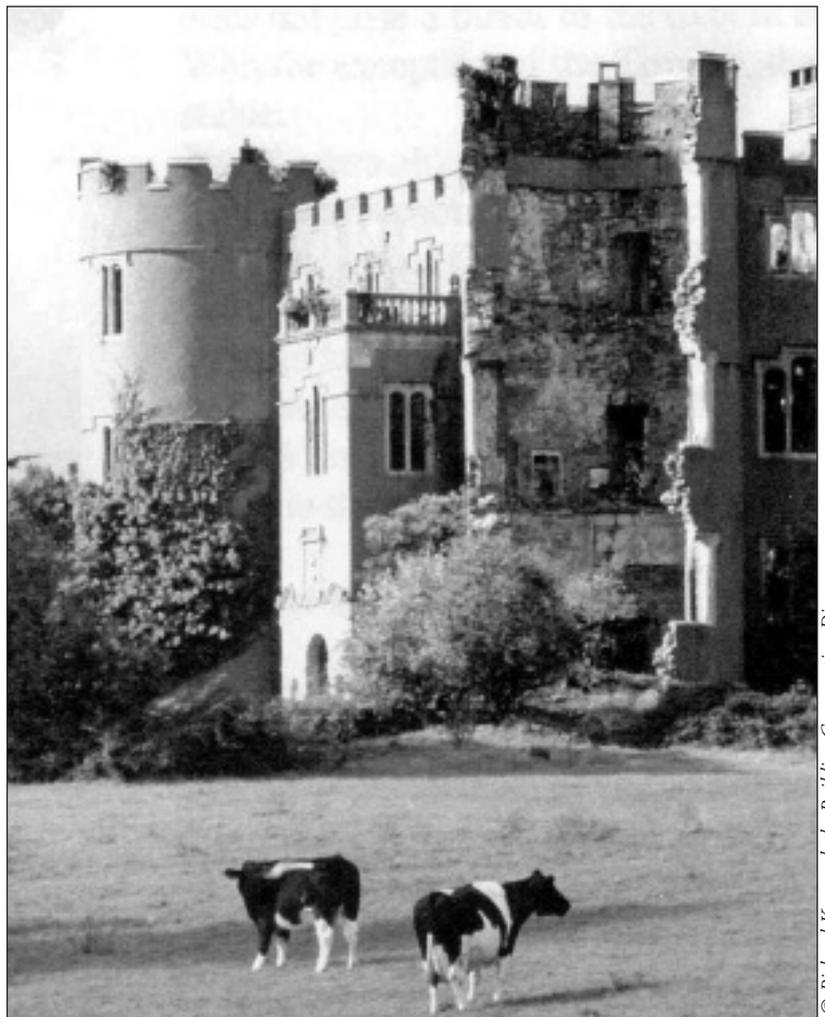
However were the Council to agree to compulsory purchase the property and immediately pass it on with a 'back to back' arrangement with a building preservation trust such as Ruperra Conservation Trust, Heritage Lottery Fund money would be available for restoration. As a 'not for profit' organisation the Trust could offer an alternative to large-scale development of the site, without the need for enabling development to offset the cost of restoration.

The Trust feels that the proposed intrusion of 15 new houses would ruin the historic landscape and suspects that even this number would not produce sufficient profit for a developer. There would inevitably be a demand for more new build.

The chief planning officer has told Ruperra Conservation Trust that the council is in support of the conversion of the buildings into flats and houses, provided they were sympathetic to the character of the site and he assured the Trust that any new building work would be forced to take the site's natural and historic significance into account and added that the council was equally concerned about the decay of the building.

He said, "I would very much hope that we would get a resolution soon because the castle, which is a place of great historic importance, is deteriorating as we speak."

The owner of the Castle denied that the delay was due to deficiencies in his plans, (which we reported in the previous article in the Bulletin) insisting that the process was being conducted at the Council's pace. He said "The ball is not in my court - my consultants have done all that the local authority has asked of them. I understand from Cadw and the Local Authority that because it is a very prestigious and important project, it takes a long time to follow it up, but hopefully that time is coming to an end. ...I have no intention of selling it, but the building is going



derelict on a daily basis and no one wants it to be an eyesore. We will do all we can to restore the castle to its former glories."

A spokesperson from Cadw however told the reporter that although discussions had been held with the owner, no application for the necessary Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent had so far been received.

In the last few weeks the Trust has learned that there is no longer a tenant living in the Bothy, and has noticed that often the gate to the south of the castle and the main gate to the north have been left open. Until the Trust alerted the Caerphilly Conservation Officer last week, the north gate was off its hinges and lying on the grass at the side of the drive. The polo ponies appear to have gone and at times the castle seems to be completely unprotected.

The Trust is now asking the Welsh Assembly to intervene to save the castle and prevent the national scandal of neglect of our heritage. They feel that the castle's dual status as a grade II* listed building and scheduled ancient monument should be contributing to preserving it and not confusing the issue. The Trust wants to be in a position to purchase the Castle if it becomes available and is seeking pledges from individuals and organisations for donations towards that end.

*Pat Moseley and Janet Wilding
September 2005*

Gerddi-WWW.

More gardens to visit while you are travelling round the UK.

<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/english-gardens.htm>

A review of the **history** of gardens in England from Roman to Victorian times, with gardens to see today. An A-Z gazetteer of great gardens open to the public in England, Wales and Scotland.

<http://www.sightseeing.co.uk/index.html>

A list of gardens which can be searched by post code.

Please send me photos of gardens or information on local events, news etc for 2005 for the WHGT website at

<http://gardensofwales.org.uk>

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For information, details of the Guide to Historic parks and Gardens of Wales, and news see our website <http://gardensofwales.org.uk>



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What a lot we've got!

Your home could be worth more than you think because of what's inside it

Britain's current obsession with property prices means most of us have a fair idea of how much our homes are worth. But what about their contents?

The one-television home is pretty much a thing of the past. Wide and flat-screen televisions sit next to videos, DVD players and stereo systems.

Home computers are finding their way into most homes. Designer clothes hang in many wardrobes - especially when there are teenagers in the house.

Good news for burglars! They know that the average home has far more valuable and portable goods in it than ever before. Protecting these goods with decent security systems is only part of the solution. It is equally important to ensure your house insurance has kept up to date with your recent expenditure.

So take a look at your existing policy and work out if you have enough cover for your needs. Walk from room to room jotting down the replacement value of everything you own. You know the value of key items, such as jewellery, but most other items can be forgotten about as soon as they are bought.

Check that you are properly covered for the most valuable individual items that you own, and for those that you take out of the home with you.

Fortunately a look at your insurance policy may actually give some good news as well. Some insurers include a host of extras, eg. cover for garden furniture and possessions for student children while in full-time education.

Finally, don't forget about your buildings insurance. Homeowners should be insured for the total rebuilding cost of their home, which includes everything from demolition and architects' fees to reconstruction and fixtures and fittings.

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