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Reviving the Gardens of Abbey Cwm-Hir

by Paul Humpherston

In 1834 having bought the 3000 acre Abbey Cwm-Hir estate in Radnorshire, Thomas Wilson, a lawyer from London, set about building a Hall and creating gardens and pleasure grounds. He chose the most beautiful position on the estate to build the house - a shelf on a steep south facing slope overlooking the ruins of the 12 century "Abbey of The Long Valley" - and he set about laying out gardens and grounds of great thought and beauty. Sweeping terraces and lawns were created, the garden walls containing some of the ornamental stones from the abbey. Fine specimen trees were brought from a nursery in Regent's Park in London to found an area of mixed woodland above the Abbey. A large walled garden

was built to supply fruit and vegetables for those working for the estate, and a lake was built supplying water to drive the village saw mill. He did not stop there. Carriageways were pushed through the oak woodlands of Great and Little Park, and the Abbey ruins were improved for the benefit of visitors from Llandrindod Wells and other towns. Such improvement included re-excavating the Abbey pool lying by the River Clwydog which was formerly used by the Cistercians to provide their staple diet of fish.

Abbey Cwm-Hir had probably not known such endeavour in the centuries since the Abbey had been dissolved, the monks with their learned ways had gone, and their former lands had fallen into



The new ornamental garden within the old walled garden.



© Paul Humphreton

The new garden seen from the air.



© Paul Humphreton

Old bricks re-used in border edgings.

disrepair. But it all came at a terrible price for Thomas Wilson who fell short of funds through his Radnorshire improvements and a failed business venture in London. Chastened by events he left for Australia where within a few years he rose again to become the second Lord Mayor of Adelaide!

The Philips family bought The Hall and its lands and sought to carry on Thomas Wilson's work. They doubled the size of the house in 1869, and transformed it into a Victorian Gothic Revival mansion. Pictures from different points in the 19th and 20th century show that the lawns and terraces were maintained, and that the kitchen garden remained productive through the four generations of the family, but that the woodland declined and much of the landscaping was lost as the farms were sold off and labour became less available.

In the 1960s through to the 1990s the walled garden was ploughed up (metallic and box-edged pathways and all), and the area reverted to a field overgrown with stinging nettles and briars. Damage to the walls from storms was not made good, and sections collapsed. The extensive greenhousing supporting peaches, cucumbers, melons and vines was taken down and the foundations covered with soil. The boiler system supporting an elaborate under-soil heating system on a balcony overlooking the garden was taken out. Saddest of all, eight mature and magnificent Wellingtonias fringing the garden to the north of the house and the walled garden were chopped down. Most of the woodland became impenetrable with substantial undergrowth of *Rhododendron ponticum*, briars and maple.

It was to this that I and my wife, Victoria, came at the end of 1997. Much work has since been done and much has been written in the press, and featured on Welsh TV, about the restoration of the 52 roomed Hall which is now Grade II* Cadw listed, but



© Paul Humphreton

New woodchip pathway in the woods.

surprisingly little about the restoration of the gardens and grounds which, even in their derelict condition had been listed in the 1990s in the *Cadw/ICOMOS Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales* following a visit from Elisabeth Whittle.

When we first saw The Hall, it was as much the grounds and the setting that excited us as the house. The Hall and its grounds struck us as an almost unimaginably beautiful place. There has been great joy and excitement in discovering the Victorian landscape designs that have lain covered and forgotten for so many years. In some cases, such as the spectator terracing on the former

tennis lawn and the Avenue of Conifers, we thought that we could actually bring things back to their former glory or beyond. In others, such as the walled garden, we had to redesign and use the whole area for a different purpose than that originally intended.

Elizabeth Whittle's register entry deals extensively with the walled garden which is on a steep south-west facing slope giving wonderful views of The Long Valley. She notes that in the sales particulars of 1919, it contained a heated peach house, melon house, three vineries, an unheated peach house, a cucumber house, a mushroom house and a free-standing greenhouse. These were in addition to the fruit and vegetable-growing areas.

We did not have the physical resource to return the 1.5 acres to that of a huge vegetable garden, and restoring the greenhousing was also out of the question financially. So we decided to create a trees, shrub and flower garden of unique design which would add a distinctive new dimension to the whole property. The aerial view shows how a series of circular and rectangular beds were fitted effortlessly into the original layout of straight and curving stone and brick walls.

As with the house, we employed a Radnorshire craftsman who restored most of the walling. Back in the 1970's one of the walls had blown down in a gale and had been only partially replaced. We took the bricks that had lain in the woodland for approaching 40 years, used them to edge the newly created borders, and then set about planting. Since the autumn of 2004, when I retired, we have put some 2000 plants, trees and shrubs into the walled garden. There will be further planting this winter. The inner circles are largely of roses, while the outer circles have been planted to provide rich purple, blue, yellow and green shades using such species as acers, specialist conifers, sambucus, cotinus and pieris. The rectangular beds closer to the walls have been planted more informally with herbaceous plants, shrubs and roses. The walls are clothed with climbers. The whole thing is now developing the special atmosphere that only a walled garden can generate.

During the last two winters we cleared undergrowth in the c.5 acre woodland. Most of the area was an overgrown and impenetrable thicket of briars, nettles and rhododendrons up to 30



The lawns and terraces around The Hall are little changed.

© Paul Humpherston

feet high. As sections were cleared, it was akin to pushing a veil aside. Some of the arrow straight conifers in "The Avenue" must have been planted back in the mid 19th century, and be amongst the tallest in Radnorshire. The deciduous trees include some massive examples of green and copper beech, and the original Victorian underplantings of yew became apparent. As the slope above the former tennis court was cleared, we revealed some original spectator terracing.

With the completion of the clearing, some one quarter of a mile of woodchip pathways were pushed through the woodland. Visitors to the house and grounds can now wander amidst the trees, enjoy the substantial variety of birdlife, and look down to the "Abbey of The Long Valley".

The lawns and terraces around The Hall have survived the last 170 years intact. As they have a natural sweep and elegance, we concentrated on their further planting.

There is a small lake north of the walled garden which was created in the 1830s, and embellished with a waterfall tumbling over a rocky outcrop some 50 years later. Indeed the waterfall diverted the flow away from an old pipe-work system that once fed the village sawmill. We understand that it was later used to generate power in the early 20th century. This area will be a focus of winter planting this year.

The Hall and gardens at Abbey Cwm-Hir can be visited by pre-booking. Tours of the house for individuals, couples or groups are available daily at 10.30 a.m., 2p.m. and 7p.m. Costs for the c.2 hour tour of the house with the owners, plus full access to the 12 acre grounds, are £13 per head. For groups of 10 persons or above, the price is £10 per head. Visits to the gardens only are £5 per head to include access to the remarkable Garden Room. Tours can be booked by phoning Paul and Victoria Humpherston on 01597 851727, or e mailing info@abbeycwmhir.com The web site is www.abbeycwmhir.com

Chairman's remarks

It is said that 'yesterday is a foreign country,' presumably as an encouragement to use today to make tomorrow as we would wish it to be! I am therefore eager to ensure that we all know 'whither we go,' why, and to the largest extent possible are all in agreement.

During the last year we explored options through no less than four so called 'business plans', which provided analysis of both the broad issues and the fine details to be addressed. These will have a long shelf life, but we could not possibly take up all at once. We therefore tried to identify key issues that we felt must be addressed right away.

Thus your Committee decided to seek both a paid part-time Administrator, and a dedicated office as well, which we thought might well be within our financial reach, if we were assiduous in cost control. I am glad to say this has all turned out far, far better than we dared to hope and that we have secured an office at Aberglasney, as well as the services of Andrea Dudley as administrator. I am delighted to welcome her on board. Whilst we are doing all we can to minimise the impact on our finances, it is inevitable in the longer term that subscriptions will rise if members want us to be at the forefront of protecting historic parks, gardens, and designed landscapes in Wales. Meanwhile I am glad to say that we are well on the way to finding a sufficient number of "willing victims" who will ensure our rent is paid for us for the next five years.

I am delighted too, to express heartfelt thanks to CCW, who

have long subsidised our events and publications, but this year also commenced a generous contribution towards our administration costs. Equally we are most grateful to NFU Mutual for their ongoing financial support. NFU Mutual do such good work in supporting a whole raft of excellent activities and causes in the countryside, I have no hesitation in suggesting that you bear them in mind when you review your insurance interests periodically.

So, having now secured these two prime objectives, there are two other items at the top of our priority list. Firstly we were much heartened to have been mentioned as a likely Statutory Consultee in the planning process (subject of course to the necessary legislation being enacted), but we really do need to 'hit the ground running' by giving extra effort to identifying and protecting those landscapes, parks and gardens that become endangered from time to time, perhaps even appointing a planning caseworker in advance. A priority is to identify those parks and gardens which we feel must not be lost under any circumstances, and then to persuade others that our views are correct.

Finally it is my pleasure to congratulate the branches on the sterling work which they already do in support of our core aims. Certainly there is no other amenity body I know of in Wales that has anything like the record of the WHGT in terms of primary research and local knowledge, which is readily available to the planning authorities for the benefit of our common heritage.

Michael Tree

Dire Straights

Gelli Aur (Golden Grove) at Llandeilo

This was the secondary home of the Campbells of Cawdor in Wales, having been inherited by them from the ancient family of Vaughan in 1804. The current house was built on what was then a new site between 1826 and 1834 by Sir Jeffery Wyattville who at the time was also working on Windsor Castle. The house is not huge and is listed grade II, whilst the gardens and park are listed grade II* in the Cadw Register of Parks and Gardens in Wales. Until relatively recently there were no problems here, when the house and its entire parkland setting were held on lease from the Cawdor Estate by the County Council for use as an agricultural college. Since then, the house and immediate gardens have been sold off and give every appearance of being in a parlous state.

The gardens are not very large but are hugely important as the setting for the house and in their own right. They include an arboretum, pinetum, fernery and grassed terraces to the north, with

a more formal parterre to the south-east which has stupendous views over the Tywi valley towards Dinefwr castle. This together with two rustic summer houses and an ancient deer park forms part of a most distinguished heritage which it is up to us to call for its rescue. All is now so very much unloved as to be on the official register of heritage items at risk: crude and inappropriate repairs have made matters worse at the stables, whilst the great terraces have been divided with pig netting. Here is an urgent need for all the relevant authorities to get together with the owners in order to achieve a solution that allows this great property to become again a cultural landmark for Carmarthenshire, and Wales. Do go and see it for yourself, which you can easily do by visiting the adjacent Gelli Aur Country Park: I can promise you that an interesting, but perhaps sad adventure will be in store for you.

Michael Tree

Gardens Changing Hands

Shirenewton Hall, Monmouthshire

Not every fine garden in Wales is awaiting rescue from neglect, and here on the market is a gem maintained to the highest standard. The house itself is interesting enough, built c.1830 in Italianate style, later completely encased in Jacobean style in 1900 for its new owner, and extended in 1909 by the delightfully named architect Norman Evill. In addition to some five good reception rooms with excellent views over the Bristol Channel towards the Quantocks, there is really dramatic two-storied internal hall, with balcony and organ at high level. But to me it is the gardens that sing: those around the house with their strong Chinese reminders arising from a massive red sandstone pavilion containing the 1.5 ton garden bell, and a smaller summer house and open pavilion with a domed

copper roof.

As if this were not enough, some 400 yards away is the complete Japanese Garden in pretty much the same condition now as it was when built, over a hundred years ago, to the designs of the botanical author and horticulturalist E.B.Lowe. This really is a 'tour de force' of imaginative gardening at its best complete with six ponds, a tea house, two bridges, winding paths, and tall bonsai.

So, if you or someone you know is looking for something approaching 'the best', then Shirenewton Hall will not disappoint. It is currently up for sale with Hamptons (01993 824 546) and Newland Rennie Wilkins (01291 626775).

Michael Tree

Campaigning to save Ruperra Castle, Caerphilly

The tireless campaigners for Ruperra castle were featured by Nick Palit on BBC Welsh News at 6.30 pm August 3 and in the South Wales Echo. The demonstrators, many in medieval costume, presented a petition of nearly 1000 signatures to Councillor Forehead to be handed over to the Leader of the Caerphilly Council at the full council meeting. The planning application for development at Ruperra was expected to be discussed in August but has been deferred.

The campaign points out that enabling development (new

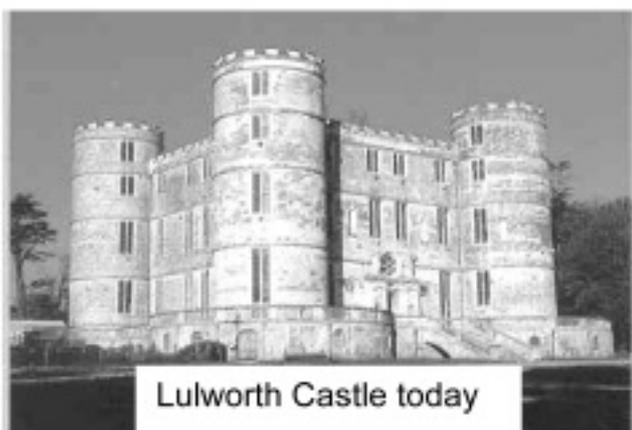
housing to pay for restoration) as occurred at Cefn Mably, will destroy the historic setting of the house it purports to save. The group have prepared an excellent document reproduced here which makes the case against development, and for consolidating Ruperra as an Ancient Monument.

The predicament of Ruperra has appeared regularly in this Bulletin: Autumn 1999, Spring 2003, Autumn 2003, and nos 39, 40, 46.

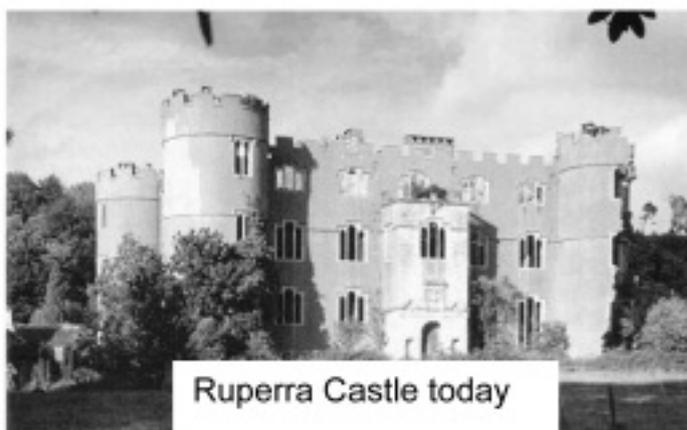
Caroline Palmer

Ruperra - The Case for Consolidation as an Ancient Monument

- **Full restoration of the castle is simply not viable.** The costing exercise for an enabling development carried out in March 2007 by the Spitalfields Trust, experts in this field, showed full restoration is no longer realistic. At £10M, the financial and environmental costs are just too high.
- **18 new houses could not finance the restoration of the castle.** This can now be demonstrated. Over the past 5 years Caerphilly County Borough Council planners have been misled by the owner. Once he obtains planning consent - still without benefit of Listed Building Consent or Scheduled Monument Consent, his next move must be to make his profit by selling on to another developer who will face the same problems, waste more Council time and inevitably request more houses.
- **A Test for Caerphilly.** This planning application tests the Welsh system for protection of our country's greatest buildings. The councillors must show that they understand the importance of not allowing a developer to desecrate our heritage.
- **The Lulworth Solution.** Built at the same time, Lulworth Castle is almost identical to Ruperra. Also burnt out (in 1928) it has now been consolidated. Consolidation as a Scheduled Ancient Monument is a perfectly responsible, effective and entirely respectable approach for these great 17th century country houses. With public access to Ruperra assured, sources of funding will be Cadw, the Countryside Council for Wales, and two strands of Heritage Lottery funding. A new cost exercise was carried out in June 2007 by the quantity surveyors who worked on Lulworth Castle.
- **A Low Carbon Footprint.** Consolidation will mean minimal upgrading of services and access roads for Ruperra. Coed Craig Ruperra, owned by Ruperra Conservation Trust has public access and many visitors to Ruperra will walk through the woods to the castle. Compared with enabling development, the lightening of the carbon footprint will be huge. It would represent a commendably Green solution.



Lulworth Castle today



Ruperra Castle today

The placards saying 'No housing at Ruperra' are certainly attracting public attention in many areas – even north Wales. Please phone 02920 885840 or e-mail pat.moseley@btinternet.com if you would like a placard for your garden or window or a small notice for your car.

Renaissance Gardens of Wales

15 September 2007 at Aberglasney Gardens

When I was a little girl in Llandeilo, I was terrified by stories about the ghosts of Aberglasney, and its ruined, brambly, Sleeping Beauty appearance only reinforced this. So it was an especial pleasure to attend the Study Day organised by my branch of the WHGT, whose chair, Robin Whalley, began by paying tribute to the work of William Wilkins in effecting the 'awakening' of Aberglasney. The focus of the day was to clarify the debate about the Gardens' origins, and whether they are truly Renaissance or merely a later imitation of the genre.

The first speaker was Elisabeth Whittle, Inspector of Historic Gardens and Parks for Cadw, who began by placing Aberglasney in the political and social context of the early 17th Century. She described how, after the Act of Union, the landowning gentry in Wales grew in number and were drawn into more important social positions. Their increased status was reflected in the large number of country houses and gardens dating from this time: an estimated 600. The influence of grand houses in England, such as Hampton Court, Hatton, Windsor Castle (1607) and Cranborne (1610), may be seen in the adoption by Welsh gardens of many typical features.

These cultured Welsh landowners were also influenced by contemporary publications on planting (for example: works by John Parkinson), and by travel. The Earl of Worcester sent his gardeners from Raglan to the Continent for inspiration and his brother, Charles Somerset, described in 1611 the gardens of the Tuileries, Blois and Amboise. The settings of these French gardens, comprising a castle on hill, with terraces sloping down to water, would be emulated, most ambitiously, in the gardens of Raglan and St. Donat's Castle.

Although the archival evidence of layout is piecemeal, it is still possible in many surviving gardens to identify characteristic items such as bowling greens, terraces and raised walks, gazebos and summerhouses, stairs, mazes, grottoes, knots and formal water. Ms. Whittle's illustrations powerfully evoked the precision and romance of these gardens: for example, Bodysgallen, Troy House (near Monmouth), Whitehouse Gardens in Chirk Castle, Llantrithyd Place, Vaynol and Gwydir.

Penny David, author of *A Garden Lost in Time, the Mystery of the Ancient Gardens of Aberglasney*, then gave a human perspective to the Gardens, by tracing the history of Bishop Rudd, who bought Aberglasney in 1605, and of his family. Rudd had been well-known at the Court of Queen Elizabeth and had even, at one time, been considered for the see of Canterbury, but fell from grace after referring to the Queen's age! As Bishop of St. David's, he would have travelled widely and would therefore have been in a position to see the many developments and improvements that were being effected by the gentry in other parts of Wales: for example, Raglan. He was clearly able to afford ambitious garden projects, as he was most shrewd in achieving advantageous marriages for his children, marrying his son Anthony to a lady from Gloucester 'of considerable fortune'. After Anthony's death, the estate passed to his brother Rice, who had also married well, first to Jane of the ap Rhys family of Tenby and then to Elizabeth Aubrey of Llantrithyd. This marriage shows a link, consequently, with another contemporary Renaissance Welsh garden – and with the literati of the time, for it seems that the antiquarian John



© John Reed

Aberglasney as an evocative ruin, photographed by John Reed. First published in: The Third Day: Landscape and the Word: An Anthology of Poems and Photographs. Edited by Kathy Miles, Llandysul, Gomer, 1995

Aubrey visited Aberglasney. A further literary connection was provided by the marriage of Rice's daughter to the widower of the famous Restoration poet, 'Orinda'. In conclusion, it seems clear that the Rudds had the money and the connections to devise and construct a formal Renaissance garden.

The final speaker was Kevin Blockley, archaeological consultant to Aberglasney for the last ten years. His talk traced the development of the Gardens from the Sixteenth Century to the present day and was illustrated by a fascinating interplay between romantic photographs of dereliction and decay, and precise archeological rectilinear plans. Drawing on various techniques of dating, he considered the age and function of the gatehouse, the putative axis of the diamond patterned cobbling which is now thought to lead to a pavilion in the south-east corner of the Cloister Garden. Here there are remains of a fireplace, a drain to take water away, a slot possibly for a cupboard – in short, the furnishings for a place of feasting and hospitality. This is borne out by finds of C17 Portuguese tiles and some fragments of Dutch blue and white of the same period, although of course it is difficult to know if these objects originated in the house or the garden.

He showed how Aberglasney has many parallels with other Renaissance gardens: many had raised walkways on walls with cloisters beneath, while a gatehouse with wings may also be seen in St. Pierre, Cors-y-Gedol and Trefalon. The day concluded, in glorious warmth and low, golden raking light, with a tour of the immediate vicinity of the house, to examine these and other features. In such serenity, one hopes that the ghosts sleep at last, satisfied that the origins of Aberglasney are finally recognized.

Anne Evans

D.I.Y. Garden Urns at Dale Castle



Dale castle, and warships in the bay. An early 20th century postcard published by Griffiths of Haverfordwest and Milford Haven.

© The Peter Davis Collection

On a beautiful day in April the Pembrokeshire branch of the WHGT visited Dale Castle near the south west coast of the county. The owner was welcoming and informative. The large lawns slope down towards the eastern entrance and are



© Gerry Hudson

divided into informal terraces by low stone walls surmounted by six urns made of cement composition or “artificial” stone, each about 50cm high. These were evidently made at Dale Castle in a cast-iron mould which the owner still possesses.

Imagine a cast-iron urn sliced in half vertically. Built-in is provision for bolts to hold the halves together. Also provided is a steel bowl with two arms which can be bolted to the top. It is

not known whether any material was needed to prevent cement mix binding to the metal. The plinth of the finished urn proved to be rather thin and prone to crack. There is no manufacturer’s name but the number 1119 in numerals about 20mm high is cast in the iron.



© Gerry Hudson

It would be of great interest if any reader knows the date or the likely maker.

One imagines that it might be illustrated amongst the sundries at the end of a glasshouse manufacturer’s catalogue.

Gerry Hudson (Recorder for Pembrokeshire)

Autumn Health Check



NFU Mutual

As we approach the autumn and winter, now is the time to think about giving the outside of your house a tidy up. With the summer we have had this year and the abnormally high amount of rainfall we have received, it is a good time to check your drains and gutters.

Removing unwanted debris from your gutters is ideally undertaken at the beginning of winter. This will clear away all the leaves that have fallen during the autumn.

If leaves, seeds and debris build up it can lead to overflowing gutters which drench walls and can cause damage. It also puts unnecessary strain on guttering which can lead to blockages and more serious problems.

Most blockages are just leaves, moss or bits of rubbish and can be cleared fairly easily.

To prevent your downpipe from becoming blocked you can place a rolled up ball of chicken wire at the top of the down pipe, but make sure you clear any debris away from the chicken wire regularly.

Also make sure your drains are clear from leaves and debris to allow water to flow away freely.

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Book Review

Register of Landscapes Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales

Additional and revised entries, Vol 1. Cadw/icomos. 2007.
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Most members are now familiar with their regional 'bible' of Cadw registered gardens, that massive work in 6 volumes written and/or co-ordinated by Elisabeth Whittle, which was commenced with Gwent in 1992 and completed with Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire in 2002. Not all will know that they can now view any of these entries, electronically, by visiting the garden of choice through the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales website, Coflein, and seeking the pdf of the entry amongst the electronic images stored on the site. This is a great boon to those interested in just a single garden.

A register such as this is never complete, more gardens are discovered, or in some cases entries must be rewritten in the light of new discoveries. Here is the first of what will doubtless be a succession of additional volumes, describing a total of 13 sites, two revised entries (for Dewstow House Monmouthshire and Plas Machynlleth, Powys), and 11 new entries not previously included.

The new entries are a mixed bag indeed, their stars ranging from Penrice Castle, Swansea to the 1960s garden by Dame Sylvia Crowe at the now decommissioned Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station. Also in north Wales is Hendre House (home of our chairman), and in south Ceredigion is the previously inaccessible site of Cardigan Castle.

The other new entries are all additions to the Gwent and Glamorgan volumes, and include a number of town gardens: the Nelson Garden, Monmouth (where WHGT members can take much credit for its rescue) Coryton House in Cardiff, Nos 15 & 17 Stow Park Circle, Newport, and urban parks Bailey Park and Linda Vista Gardens in Abergavenny. There are two country houses Wonastow Court, Monmouth and Coytrahen, Bridgend, and a fine deer park: Chepstow Park, concealed in commercial forestry. A final contrast is added by the entry for Whitchurch Hospital, Cardiff, once one of the grandest Edwardian lunatic asylums in Wales, where the grounds, laid out with therapeutic purpose in mind, retain many fine and now substantial trees.

The volume is published bilingually, back to back and is therefore thicker than its 76 pages would suggest. Anyone who has collected the preceding volumes will want this one too. Those with a more passing interest may be happy to await the appearance of these further entries on www.coflein.gov.uk.

Caroline Palmer



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