

WYNNSTAY

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OS Map 117

Grid Ref SJ 308 426

Former County Clwyd

Unitary Authority Wrexham

Community Council Ruabon

Designations Listed building: Wynnstay Hall stables (grade II);
Wynnstay entrance archway (grade II); Wynnstay column (grade II)

Site Evaluation Grade I

**Primary reasons
for grading**

Wynnstay is an outstanding eighteenth-century landscape park, one of the largest and most important in Wales. Although now cut in two by the A483 trunk road the park still retains many of its historic features, some of which are attributed to Richard Woods and Capability Brown. An exceptional and rare survival is the pleasure ground or shrubbery designed by Capability Brown. The park also contains some important monuments, lodges and other built structures, some by leading architects. Although Capability Brown's lake has gone half of a large rockwork cascade remains at its lower end.

Type of Site

Landscape park; informal garden; terrace garden

Main Phases of Construction

1768-85; c. 1819-30

SITE DESCRIPTION

Wynnstay is a large, tall, rather forbidding Victorian mansion built of stone in French Renaissance chateau style. It stands on a plateau to the north of the Dee valley, south-east of Ruabon, and from it there are fine views to the Ruabon mountains to the west and the Vale of Llangollen and Berwyn mountains to the south.

The present house is the last of a series on the site. The estate was first known as Watstay, after Wat's Dyke, which runs through it, and was in the possession of the Eyton family until the seventeenth century. The first house was probably that built by William Eyton in 1616. In the second half of the seventeenth century the Eyton heiress married Sir John Wynn (died 1719), who rechristened the house Wynnstay. The only survival of this era is a stone tower embedded in the north end of the house, built by Sir John. The estate went in 1719 to Watkin Williams, a distant relation, who took the name Wynn. Watkin had inherited further estates in 1718, making him an extremely wealthy man. In 1740 he inherited his father's baronetcy, becoming the 3rd baronet. In 1736-39 he rebuilt Wynnstay in plain Palladian style. It was designed by Francis and William Smith of Warwick, and its main pedimented front faced west. In 1770 a 'great room' was added by the 4th baronet, at the east end of the south front. After this, although there were some alterations to the appearance of the house, there were no major changes until the fire of 1858, which

resulted in almost complete rebuilding on the old foundations. The new house was designed for the sixth baronet by Benjamin Ferrey between 1858 and 1865.

The house has two storeys, and is punctuated by higher, steep-roofed towers. The main entrance is now on the west side, but was originally on the south side through a porte cochere, now walled up. At the east end of the south front a former conservatory, later a billiard room, links the main block with the former private wing, which has two conical-roofed turrets on its east side. The house is now in institutional use, as a school.

The classical stables are built round a courtyard immediately to the north of the house. They are of honey-coloured stone, one and a half storeys high, with central pediments on the east and west sides, and a large central arch on the west. All but the west side was built in 1738-39 by the Smiths of Warwick for Watkin Williams Wynn, to accompany his new house. The fourth side was built in similar, slightly heavier style, in 1845-47, possibly by George Tattersall. The building is now incorporated into the school.

The core of Wynnstay Park lies on the rolling plateau around the house. The main entrance is now off the Ruabon to Overton road (A 539) to the north of the house. The present area that retains a park-like character lies largely to the south, west, and north-west of the house, and is only a fraction of the large park as it existed in the nineteenth century. This extensive park stretched from Newbridge in the west to Ruabon in the north, the Kennels in the east, and the Dee valley in the south. Despite the fact that most of the outer parts of the park are no longer used as such it has survived in its entirety except in the north-west corner where roads and housing estates have encroached on it, and the swathe cut by the new A483 trunk road, which has effectively cut the park in two.

The first park that is recorded at Wynnstay is the deer park enclosed in 1678 by Sir John Wynn. Of this there is no trace. As well as building a new house it appears that Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 3rd bt., made improvements to the park; the title page to A Pocket Book of Mapps of Demesne Land & c. belonging to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn Baronet (c. 1740) shows lodges at the Ruabon and Oswestry entrances, with drives flanked by young-looking avenues. Both were replaced by later lodges. The page also has drawings of a bath house and cold bath, now gone. The map of the estate in the Pocket Book shows that the park had already been given a formal layout by 1740, and that much of this was retained or only modified in later landscaping. The park occupied an area between a road (now gone) to Newbridge, just west of the Afon Eitha valley, on the west, the Ruabon-Overton road on the north, the Rhosymadoc road on the east, and the lane west of Rhosymadoc on the south. This area formed the core of the later park. The chief features were the diagonal avenue running south-east across the park from the Ruabon gate, the double avenue flanking the entrance drive north of the house, and a long formal canal on the site of the present lake west of the house. The canal was already in existence in 1693/94, when it is referred to in a letter from Richard Mostyn to Edward Lhuyd as 'Sr John Wynne's noble canal'. At the north end of the canal was a mount, and there was a bath house in the north-west corner of the park, on the site of the present bath house. There were further avenues along the north boundary, to the south-east of the gardens, and a long one running north-south along the lip of the plateau to the west of house, from the north to the south boundary of the park. In addition there were blocks of woodland in the western and south-eastern parts of the park. Features of this early park retained by later landscapers were the Ruabon avenue and the entrance avenue. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map shows a track along the remnants of the north-south avenue to the west of the lake, and shows also that the

column was deliberately placed on this axis. Parts of this axis remain as modern farm track. The canal was retained but modified, and the bath house was rebuilt.

Major alterations were undertaken by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th bt., to the park and garden between 1768 and 1789. This began with the building of a road and park wall in 1768. From 1771-74 the canal was given a more naturalistic form by the landscaper Richard Woods. A bridge, probably designed by him, and shown in an engraving of c. 1775 by Sandby, was never built. The rustic arched 'boat house' at the north end of the lake is probably by Woods, and is very similar in style to one that he designed for Cusworth (Yorkshire). In 1777 the mount was removed and the approach to Ruabon, a 'gravel walk', was improved. In 1777 Sir Watkin commissioned Capability Brown to make further improvements. Brown visited at least five times, and produced designs for the house and offices (unexecuted), a dairy (1782), pleasure grounds, and the park, including a new lake in the valley to the north-west of the house. On Brown's death in 1783 the work was continued by an assistant, Midgley, and then by a local cartographer, John Evans, who finished a lake, the Belan Water, in the valley to the north-west of the house, by damming the Belan stream. A large rockwork cascade was constructed at the foot of the lake and was compared to the Bowood (Wiltshire) one. Byng found that the lake was 'in a very inferior scale to what Browne proposed'. However, the lake was made, and was ceremonially 'opened' with great fanfare in 1784, the event being rounded off by a dinner in the great avenue.

Although the lake itself has gone most of the features associated with it have survived in Bathground Wood. At the foot of the lake site is a huge, flat-topped earthen dam across the valley. At its base is a culvert which remains in good condition and in working order. It is a barrel-vaulted tunnel, the entrance faced with dressed stone, the sides lined with stone, the vault with brick, with stone slabs linked with iron clamps on the floor. About half way up the outer side of the dam is a similar, brick-lined culvert (dry), to the east of which is a small ruined stone building. Above this culvert, on the top of the dam, is a hole with stone slabs over it and brick walling inside, which possibly connects with the culvert.

The dam is said to have survived intact until about 1900, when the river cut through it near the west end. From the large amount of tumbled boulders, some with iron clamps attached to them, and the broken edge of a stone wall protruding from the earthen dam on the east side of the cutting it would appear that what fell here was part of the cascade. To the west of this the dam continues, with a rockwork face of large blocks of stone. Water was led along a straight channel edged and floored with similar large stones and then over a sheer rockwork face c. 15 m high. The channel and rockwork cascade below it remain in good condition. To the west is a deep, steep-sided overflow channel next to the valley side.

Further north, on the east edge of the lake site is the former boathouse. This consists of a large barrel-vaulted chamber with stone walls and a brick vault. The front is built of fine dressed stone, some of which has fallen. On the south side is a defaced roundel (that on the north side has fallen). Water enters the building at the back from a stone-lined drain which runs underground in a north-easterly direction. Its course can be traced where it has fallen in in two places.

The Bath House, built in about 1785 by James Wyatt, survives. It is a small classical pavilion with a central portico, in front of which is a rectangular bath-tank. It is situated on the north-east side of Bathground Wood, on the slope at the north end of the former lake. Other remains in the wood include the footings of a moss house, near the north end, and a ruined ice-house near the eastern edge of the wood, to the

south of the column. This is a large circular brick-lined, concave-sided chamber built into an artificial terrace on a steep slope. It survives only to just above ground level. It has a sloping access point on the west side and the remains of a doorway on the north side. The terrace is partly revetted with a low stone wall and two yews have been planted next to the chamber.

Also in about 1785 a new drive was made to the east, leading to the classical Kennels Lodge, designed by James Wyatt, on the Ruabon to Overton road. A smaller classical lodge, also probably by Wyatt, was built where the drive crossed the Rhos y madoc lane. This is now a private house. Further south along the lane was a columned gateway, only one column of which is left. The lodge and school flanking the entrance there are later.

The park was embellished with numerous lodges and commemorative structures in a wide variety of architectural styles, most of which survive. The most prominent monument is the column to the north-west of the house, on the eastern edge of Bathground Wood. This is a tall Doric fluted column, erected in 1789 in memory of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, fourth baronet, on his untimely death, by his grieving mother. It was designed by James Wyatt, and forms a prominent landmark both in the park and in the area around. A stairway inside leads to a railed walkway at the top, above which is a bronze urn on a pedestal.

The 5th baronet (died 1840) spent £40,000 on improvements at Wynnstay between 1819 and 1830. He was responsible for extending the park southwards and westwards to take in the picturesque opportunities offered by the deeply cut Dee valley. An estate map of c. 1800-1820 shows the layout of the park at this time. Sir Watkin's first building was the Nant-y-belan Tower, which is detached from the main area of the park, in a remote position on the northern edge of the Dee valley, two kilometres south of the house. This is a ruined circular stone tower with a heavy cornice, standing on a basement that originally contained habitable rooms. Its precarious position, perched on the very edge of the precipitous slope down to the river, has resulted in its partial collapse, and only the north side survives. It was designed by Sir Jeffry Wyattville soon after 1800, to commemorate men of Sir Watkin's regiment of Ancient British Light Dragoons who fell in the Irish rebellion of 1798. It is modelled on the tomb of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia, Rome.

The western half of the park occupies a rolling plateau between the Afon Eitha valley on the east, the river Dee on the south, and the villages of Rhosymedre and Newbridge on the west. The park is bounded all along the west side by a substantial stone wall of rubble construction. The north end of the park has been destroyed by new roads and housing estates. Semi-natural deciduous woodland occupies most of the Afon Eitha valley and the slopes above the Dee valley (Hopyard Wood, which also contains modern coniferous plantations). The top of the plateau is farm land, divided into large fields. Two former drives run from the house to lodges on the west side of the park. Both are now farm tracks, and the southern one is partly disused and overgrown. Both cross the Afon Eitha over single-arched stone bridges. The northern one is roughly built, mostly of rounded stones, and has a pointed arch (with wooden supports under it). The southern one is dilapidated, and with a large concrete pipe under the arch. The southern drive is now cut off by the Wrexham by-pass; the northern one passes under it and continues to Home Farm and Green Lodge to the north-west. The south drive joins it on the east edge of Hopyard Wood, with a branch running down through the wood to Newbridge Lodge.

Some of the park's lodges are of outstanding architectural interest, designed by notable architects in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Running clockwise from the main entrance (Broth

Lodge) are Park Eyton Lodge (or Kennels Lodge), a small classical building built in about 1785 and attributed to James Wyatt; Rhos y Madoc Lodge (or Baker's Lodge), an even smaller classical building, also attributed to Wyatt; School Lodge; Dandy Lodge; Nant-y-cae-coch Lodge; the site of a lodge, now gone, next to the drive west of the house, just above the Afon Eitha; Newbridge Lodge (see below); Waterloo Tower (see below), and Green Lodge.

Two lodges of very different character were built in about 1820. One, Waterloo Tower, stands in a grove of oak, beech and sweet chestnut trees on the top of a prominent knoll in the south-west corner of the park. A gothic confection, probably by Benjamin Gummow, it is a two- and three-storey small stone building with mullioned windows and a crenellated top. At its south end is a tall octagonal tower containing a spiral staircase. The tower overlooks a rock-cut ravine on the west, along the top of which crenellated walls run north and south from the tower. The south wall is punctuated by a higher bastion. The other, Newbridge Lodge, stands at the park entrance below Waterloo Tower, next to the river. It is a small, fortress-like Mannerist building by C.R. Cockerell, and is thought to be one of the finest lodges in Britain. The entrance is flanked by a curving stone wall on the west and iron railings on the south and is closed by high iron gates of relatively simple design. The lodge stands inside the entrance, to the west of the drive. It is a small stone building with three wide round arches on the rusticated ground floor and corresponding small circular windows above. In front the drive is flanked by two pairs of free-standing tall piers of rusticated stonework with rounded tops. Along the river, opposite the lodge, are iron railings on a low stone base. The drive runs through the wood as a stony track.

Planting in the park includes some clumps, plantations, and perimeter belts, mainly of deciduous trees, around the north, east and south sides of the central core of the park. The estate map of 1800-20 shows the main areas of woodland more or less as they are now, plus narrow perimeter belts along the boundaries. Most of these have gone, the main sections remaining being those along the south and west boundaries. A great straight avenue, now including fine mature limes, sweet chestnuts, horse chestnuts, and sycamores was planted before 1740, from the Ruabon entrance at the north end of the park, where an entrance arch, replacing earlier lodges, was built by John Jones in 1783, to School Lodge on the east side of the park. The Ruabon gateway was the original main entrance to the park, but is now disused and cut off by new roads from the rest of the park. A second avenue, flanking the present drive, crosses the first north of the house. Both these avenues are shown on the 1740 and 1800-20 estate maps. Today, the main areas that retain parkland planting lie to the south and north-west of the house. Considerable stretches of the Ruabon to School Lodge avenue survive, as does the southern end of the north-south avenue. Bathground Wood to the west, described in 1798 as 'large growing plantations, which in time will be highly ornamental' (Skrine, 1798) is now largely modern coniferous plantation. In the western half of the park the main areas of semi-natural deciduous woodland survive in Hopyard Wood and along the western boundary. A large and prominent clump mainly of oak and sycamore, Round Wood, stands above the western side of the Afon Eitha valley, close to the A483 Wrexham by-pass.

The garden consists of a large formal terrace to the south of the house and an informal garden or pleasure ground of about one and a half acres to the east. The terrace is bounded by a dressed stone revetment wall, with a small corner pavilion in the south-east corner. The eastern end is sunken, with stone steps on the north side down to a wide circular gravel path, in the middle of which is a stone-edged bed divided into star and scallop shapes. This area also has four rectangular rose beds. The rest

of the terrace is laid out to lawn. From the terrace there are magnificent views southwards over the park to the Welsh hills beyond. Wide stone steps lead down from the central gravel path at the east end to the informal garden.

The pleasure ground is roughly D-shaped, with the straight side along the north boundary. It lies on level ground and is laid out to lawn with scattered specimen trees. These include fine mature cedars, oaks, fern-leaved beech, wellingtonias, monkey puzzles, hollies, a tulip tree, and a golden oak. The boundary is wooded, with underplantings of laurels and other evergreens. The garden is surrounded by a long, substantial ha-ha, which extends from the terrace south of the house around the south and west sides of the garden, and on northwards to enclose the area of outbuildings and the former kitchen garden. Where the drive enters from the west it forms a massive bank through which the drive passes in a tunnel.

A gravel path runs along the west side of the garden, and half-way down the north side, as far as a circle of gravel, in the middle of which is a short circular column standing on a circular stone plinth (a former sundial). This path passes the chapel, a former orangery, situated near the west end of the north boundary of the garden. This is a single-storey stone building with a pitched slate roof. Between flat pilasters are round-headed gothic windows and doorway. Near the east end of the north side of the garden, facing south, is the Dairy, a plain classical pavilion of brick, with a stone pedimented portico of four front and two side Doric columns. It is built into the garden boundary wall, and its north end consists of a worker's cottage.

In the middle of the garden is a large circular pool, now much overgrown with rushes and willow, but still with water in it. In the middle of the southern part of the garden is a Victorian fountain standing on a circular stone base. It is of stone and concrete, scallop-edged, with a central splayed, faceted plinth with a base for a fountain (now gone). Within the boundary belt of trees along the north side of the garden is some overgrown rockwork, with narrow winding paths.

The earliest records of the garden are a drawing and map of c. 1740 in A Pocket Book of Mapps The drawing shows a wide, formal, raised terrace walk around the west side of the house, overlooking the canal and deer park, a forecourt on the north side, with a turning circle, and the raised terrace walk continuing around the south side of the house, enclosing quite a large area of garden. The map shows the terrace and forecourt, and walled gardens to the east. The ornamental garden is shown in two sections, that nearest the house with an elaborate parterre, with to the east of it a simpler layout of cross paths meeting in a central oval, with grass quarters. To the north of this is a walled garden that was probably utilitarian. These formal gardens were swept away by the 4th baronet in the 1770s and 1780s. Carriage drives arrived from the west and north to a more naturalistic forecourt, and a simple greensward was made on the west, between the house and the new landscaped lake. To the east the pleasure ground was designed by Capability Brown for Sir Watkin Williams Wynn between 1777 and 1782. Sir Watkin was keen that Brown should start his work at Wynnstay here, outside his new Great Room (1770), and the pleasure ground was nearing completion in 1779. John Byng, who visited in 1784, said of it: 'From the house we went into the shrubbery, which is neat and well laid out; (and was the last work of my friend Lancelot Browne)' (Torrington Diaries). A theatre had been built to the east of the house in 1771 (rebuilt 1783), but this has long since disappeared, and its exact location is not known. In 1782 Brown designed the Dairy, which still stands. The great ha-ha around the garden and grounds can be also ascribed to Brown. A slightly later addition to the garden was a 'greenhouse' or orangery, designed by John

Evans and James Wyatt, and built in 1785. This was converted in about 1876 by Edmund B. Ferrey into the present chapel. The spaces between the pilasters were filled in with stone and given the present windows. The 1800-20 estate map shows the pleasure ground in detail. It then included an area of formal garden along its north side to which a curving path running west of the pond led. In its centre was a small pool. To its east was a rectangular walled area. This part of the garden is now cut off from the pleasure ground by a back lane. The formal garden has gone but the walled compartment remains. The map shows the pleasure ground planted uniformly with well spaced trees or shrubs except for an area in the north-west corner which is shown differently, perhaps denoting a flower garden.

When the house was rebuilt in 1858-65 the pleasure ground remained largely untouched. The 1873 Ordnance Survey map shows both straight and winding paths, that on the east boundary continuing northwards along the ha-ha right around the outside of the kitchen garden. The only path to survive is the stretch along part of the north side of the garden. The fountain was added in the Victorian period, and is shown on the 1873 map. Some tree planting, particularly of conifers, was carried out during this phase, and the wellingtonias and monkey puzzles have now reached a considerable size. The rockwork along the north boundary of the garden is probably also of this period.

The terrace arrangement around the house after the rebuilding differed from that at present: there was a large terrace to the west, a semi-circular forecourt in the middle of the south side, and a smaller terrace, corresponding to the sunken part of the present terrace, to its east.

Capability Brown's pleasure ground is a rare survival of his work in this field. Its structure remains intact, some of the planting remains, and the building by Brown, the Dairy, although disused, is more or less complete.

The former kitchen garden lies to the north-east of the house, north of the Pleasure Ground. It is D-shaped, the south side being straight. The brick walls stand to their full height of c. 3.5 m. The curving north end wall has a blocked doorway and cavity wall, with heating flues between the skins, some of which are exposed where the inner skin is broken. Some old fruit trees remain trained on the walls. All internal layout has gone, and the area is used by a prep department of the school. There is a large arched entrance on the east side. In the south-east corner is a separate compartment, now containing old school demountable buildings and a small shed.

The garden was made as part of the improvements of the 1770s and 1780s, and was probably designed by Capability Brown. It forms an integral part of his scheme for the area to the east of the house, which includes the pleasure ground and kitchen garden within one extensive ha-ha. The garden is shown on the 1800-20 estate map in its present form, with a path running north-south down the middle to a circular pool at the south end, and a perimeter path. A path runs around the outside, between the wall and the ha-ha, and continues on around the edge of the pleasure ground.

Sources

Primary

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