

CADW/ICOMOS REGISTER OF LANDSCAPES, PARKS AND GARDENS
OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST IN WALES

REGISTER ENTRY

MERTHYR MAWR HOUSE

Ref number	PGW (Gm) 12 (BRI)
OS Map	170
Grid ref	SS 888 779
Former county	Mid Glamorgan
Unitary authority	Bridgend
Community council	Merthyr Mawr
Designations	Listed building: Merthyr Mawr House and stables Grade II; lodge Grade II. Scheduled ancient monuments: St Roque's chapel (Gm 247); Merthyr Mawr inscribed stones (Gm 26); Chapel Hill camp (Gm 248)
Site evaluation	Grade II*
Primary reasons for grading	Small, attractive landscape park laid out at the same time as the house was built in the early nineteenth century. Contemporary pleasure grounds with some good specimen trees and shrubs, and gardens with a very fine large glasshouse of 1900. Remains of the walled gardens of the earlier house.
Type of site	Landscape park; informal garden; walled kitchen garden; walled garden
Main phases of construction	Sixteenth-seventeenth century; 1804-38

Site description

Merthyr Mawr House is situated on a south-south-east facing slope on the north side of the Ogmore river valley, a short distance from the southern edge of Bridgend. It lies towards the eastern end of the small park, and is approached by drives leading from the north-east and south-west to a forecourt on its north front. The house is a five-bay two-storey classical mansion faced with sawn white local carboniferous limestone. It has a gently sloping hipped roof and sash windows, some of which are false. The wide outer windows emphasise the horizontal axis of the house. In the centre of the north front is a single-storey porch supported on two Tuscan columns. This was supplied by Blore of Piccadilly. A lower wing, partly built later than the main house, projects to the east. A verandah, built in 1819, projects from the ground floor of the west side of the house, running the full width of the house. It has a glass canted roof supported on six latticework cast-iron pillars and a paved stone floor.

The house was built on a new site by Sir John Nicholl (1759-1838), an eminent lawyer, between 1806 and 1809. It was designed in classical style by Henry Wood, architect and sculptor of London and Bristol. The building work appears not to have run smoothly, with arguments over money, and the contract with Wood was terminated in 1808. Sir John moved into the unfinished house in 1809, supervising the finishing of the works himself. Sir John Nicholl, a local man of wide interests, had bought the Merthyr Mawr estate from the trustees of Charles Bowen in 1804. The estate had belonged to the Stradlings of St Donat's Castle from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, but in 1738 the Stradling line died out and its properties were divided between three claimants, Hugh Bowen of Oystermouth obtaining Merthyr Mawr. Through him it came to Charles Bowen. The original house, Merthyr Mawr Hall, was situated to the south-west of the present house, on or near the site of the Home Farm, which replaced it when the new house was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The only part to survive is a section of the Tudor courtyard which forms one of the farm outbuildings.

The house has undergone very little alteration since it was built, the main alteration being the addition of a plumbing tower and part of a service wing to the east.

The stable court and other outbuildings lie to the east of the house. They are built in the same local limestone as the house and were first built at the same time, between 1806 and 1809, although Sir John Nicholl subsequently altered them. The stable court is closed by a wall on the north side, with an entrance flanked by tall piers. On the west side is a small single-storey game larder with a small lantern in the centre of the roof. Coach houses are ranged along the east side of the court, with a clock face and lantern over the central opening. At the north end of this range is a sunken room, thought to have been an ice-house, with stone slabs ranged along its walls.

Merthyr Mawr park is a medium-sized landscape park. It lies in the Ogmores valley, the river forming its southern boundary and running through the eastern end of the park. From the flood plain the ground slopes up northwards, and it is on this rising ground that most of the park is situated. It is roughly rectangular in shape, bounded on the east, west, and part of the north sides by minor public roads, and with the road to Merthyr Mawr village passing through its southern half. The house is centrally situated, backed on the north by Chapel Hill, a spur projecting out from the slope, with a steep drop on its east side down to the Ogmores river. The hill is incorporated into the pleasure grounds. The planting consists largely of narrow perimeter belts and clumps, and fingers of woodland radiating out from the house and grounds. These divide the park into five main areas of open ground (numbered I-V on the 1813 estate map).

There are two drives to the house. The main drive is tarmacked and runs from an entrance on the New Inn road on the east boundary. The entrance is flanked by square stone piers with rounded tops and is closed by a lattice-work iron gate with iron piers. A low wall runs southwards from the entrance, and to the north is a single-storey lodge with sash windows built in the same stone and style as the house. Outside the gate the drive is flanked by low stone walls and has a small bridge over a stream. A stone park wall runs northwards next to the stream, outside which the drive divides where it reaches the road. The drive winds southwards flanked by a row of beech and other specimen trees on the west side and by woodland on a steep slope down to the river on the east. The drive then passes between Chapel Hill on the west and the river

on the east before turning westwards past the kitchen garden to the stable court and forecourt on the north front of the house. The forecourt is cut into Chapel Hill on the north, and is laid out with a grass circle in the centre.

The secondary drive runs from an entrance on the Merthyr Mawr road at the south-west end of the park north-eastwards to the forecourt. On the west side of the entrance is West Lodge, a two-storey stone thatched cottage with a garden bounded by a stone wall. The entrance is flanked by piers similar to those at the main entrance, but there is no gate.

The core of the park is occupied by the house, garden and pleasure grounds, which extend up the hill behind the house and in a finger of woodland between the garden and the road at West Lodge. To the west and north of this area the park is largely open grassland dotted with a few single trees, particularly oaks. A straight hard-core turfed track runs south-westwards across the park from the west drive to a 'Telford' gate leading to the Home Farm. To the west of the West Lodge are some pines and evergreen oaks along the road. The former gardens of Merthyr Mawr Hall lie along the west boundary, with a discontinuous belt of trees along the boundary to its north. In the north-west corner is a stand of Douglas firs, with a belt of deciduous trees along the north boundary. The park is bounded by a rubble stone wall with a simple inturned entrance on the north side at the point where the lane diverges from the boundary. A belt of trees extends north-westwards from Chapel Hill along a steep bank leading in the direction of a clump of Douglas firs.

The east end of the park is divided in two by the river. To the north is a field bounded by a belt of woodland, including conifers, on the east side, a further belt on the west side, and with a large sweet chestnut in the middle. To the south is a belt of mixed woodland on the sloping ground between the drive and river. To the south of the river is a large field dotted with a few mature deciduous trees, and with more young ones planted. In the east corner is a triangular area of woodland.

To the south of the house is a wide sloping field ornamented with a few specimen trees including oaks, a pine and an evergreen oak. A ha-ha on the garden boundary gives an unimpeded view from the house and garden southwards across the park. The Merthyr Mawr road, which crosses the middle of this part of the park, is also sunken, hiding it from the house and garden and giving the impression of uninterrupted parkland right the way to the river and beyond. The road is flanked by stone walling and by oaks to the east. The field to the south of the road is level grassland, bounded on the south by the river. Part was converted into a cricket pitch in the 1850s, complete with pavilion and bandstand. Now it has reverted to field, with tennis courts to the west. Access to it is via a tunnel under the road, opposite the house. A narrow flight of stone steps lead to a barrel-vaulted tunnel under the road, which emerges into a chamber at the back of a cricket pavilion. To the east is a small stone building, and to the west a wooden open-fronted pavilion, both built against the road wall. To the west is a small pavilion on a raised stone platform, with wooden piers and a corrugated iron roof. A semi-circular plantation of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees fills a bend on the far side of the river.

At the south-west end of the park, to the south of the Merthyr Mawr road, is a woodland area in a small valley through which a mill stream runs south-westwards towards the village mill. This area was planted with bamboos in the late nineteenth century and these have now taken over the whole woodland, turning it into an impenetrable bamboo thicket.

The park was designed and planted between 1806 and 1838 by Sir John Nicholl, most of the work being carried out after the house was completed in 1809. An estate map of 1794 by John Williams shows the area of the park as fields, with very little woodland, and with the old Hall and its gardens along what became the west boundary. The public road from the New Inn road to Merthyr Mawr village ran from what became the main entrance along the north side of the river, for some of its length on the line of the subsequent drive, before joining the present road south of the house. Where the cricket pavilion now stands was a ruined building.

Sir John Nicholl played a very active role in the laying out and planting of the new park and gardens, providing designs for walls and fences and lists and plans for tree planting. These include a 'Plan for mixing trees upon a square containing one hundred', which was for 'Scotch fir', 'Pinaster', elm, sycamore, beech, larch, oak, ash, poplar, and birch. An estate map of 1813 by William Weston Young shows the park in an early stage of development. Field boundaries have gone, and the general outline and configuration of woodland and open ground that exists today is shown, but there is no drive to the West Lodge, only a straight drive across the field to the Home Farm. The public road to the east has become the main drive, the southern end of the road removed, and a new public road and bridge across the river made further south (the present road and bridge). The road was cunningly concealed from the house by sinking it between stone walls, thus giving uninterrupted views out across the park. Planting followed the boundaries of the park, the river, and emphasised changes of slope. To the south of the house it was also designed to frame a fine view from the house south-westwards to the ruins of Ogmores Castle.

By the time of the first edition Ordnance Survey maps (1875, 1876, 1877) the west drive has come into existence, the parkland planting has been extended south of the public road, and further planting has taken place on Chapel Hill. In the 1850s a cricket pitch was made in the field to the south of the house, with attendant pavilion and bandstand, both of which remain. A tunnel was made under the road to give private access to the pitch from the house, but this is not shown on the 1875 map. Changes since this time are confined to the loss of some mature trees, particularly some of the isolated specimen trees and boundary clumps along the public road, but a current programme of tree planting is replacing many of them.

The garden and pleasure grounds lie in three main areas. To the south, west and east of the house is the garden; beyond, to the south-west is a belt of wooded pleasure ground extending down to the road; and to the north of the house and drives are wooded pleasure grounds laid out on Chapel Hill. The drives arrive from the east and west at a forecourt cut into the south side of Chapel Hill, with a grass circle in front of the house.

The garden lies on ground sloping gently to the south. It can be divided into three main areas: a lawn and shrubberies to the west of the house, terraces to the south, and several compartmented areas to the east. To the west of the house the garden is bounded by a stone wall along the drive which curves southwards along the west side of the forecourt. Here there is a wide entrance with an iron gate into the garden from which a flagstone path runs along its north side to a small summerhouse. This is an open-fronted rectangular pavilion dating to the early twentieth century built against the garden wall, with brick side walls and low stone front walls either side of the entrance. The stone tile roof is supported on four wooden posts. The summerhouse stands on the much larger stone base of the nineteenth-century 'greenhouse'. In front of the entrance is an octagonal stone-edged basin with a stone bird bath on a low pedestal

in the centre. Two steps along the south edge of the platform lead down to a sloping lawn. This has a belt of shrubs along its north side, beyond the summerhouse, and some large trees on its west edge, including a cedar and oak. A snow gum (*Eucalyptus niphophila*), *Magnolia kobus* and other specimen shrubs are planted near the south side of the lawn. The garden then merges, to the west, with a wooded pleasure ground area, into which paths lead from the lawn. Towards the southern edge of the lawn is a curving narrow scree bed on the line of a former gravel path leading from the house to the pleasure ground. The garden is bounded on the south by a substantial curving stone ha-ha. The verandah along the west front of the house overlooks this garden area, and wall shrubs and climbers on it include abutilons and wisteria.

To the south of the house two terraces have been built out over the slope. The first, next to the house, is wide, paved with concrete slabs, bounded by a stone revetment wall with a low stone parapet with flat coping. A central French window in the house leads to steps down to the terrace, opposite which is a flight down to the next terrace flanked by slightly projecting piers with squat round stone vases on top. A flight of stone steps leads to the lawn on the west and a further flight of rough stone steps leads down at the east end past a small lawn. The lower terrace is a lawn, with a large cedar at the west end and a modern pond with a bog garden formerly planted with bamboos above it at the east end. The terrace is bounded in the same way as the upper one by a stone revetment wall, low parapet wall, with the same stone vases as above flanking a central flight of steps and at the east end. A flowerbed against the revetment wall is bounded by narrow stone edging. Below is a lawn to the ha-ha on the garden boundary. A sundial formerly stood on this lawn.

The east end of the garden is divided into several discrete areas. To the east of the terraces and bog garden is a sloping lawn planted with two Japanese acers, a shrub border and a large oak tree. At its southern end is an iron gate leading into the park. This area was formerly a rockery made by the present owner's grandmother. Further east is a small rectangular Edwardian rose garden. It is bounded by low stone walls with flat coping similar to those of the terraces. Its north end is apsidal and slightly higher, and it is laid out with tile paths. In the centre is an octagonal bowl on an octagonal plinth with relief decoration on its sides. Further east is a sloping lawn planted with fruit trees, bounded on the east by a pittosporum hedge. The north side of the garden is bounded here by the high brick south wall of the kitchen garden, which lies to the north. Against this wall is a long, well preserved glasshouse dating to 1900 and built by Skinner Board & Co., Bristol. It has a brick base and curving glass on a metal frame. The interior fittings remain, and a large vine is trained over the central section. A door leads through into the kitchen garden. At the east end steps lead up to it and down to a former boilerhouse against the kitchen garden wall. At the very east end of the garden is a small compartment containing a swimming pool with a curving outline dating to the 1970s. The garden is bounded on the east by a brick wall stepped up the slope, and on the north side is an arched doorway in the kitchen garden wall. The former boiler room is now a changing room.

The last compartment to the east of the terraces is the drying ground. This is a five-sided area of lawn to the south of the laundry and stable block, bounded by them on the north and on the remaining sides by high walls. These are of stone on all sides except the east, where the outside of the wall is of brick with an old espalier James Grieve apple against it. A door leads through into the rest of the garden on the short south-east side.

To the south-west of the garden is a tongue of wooded pleasure ground extending down to the road by the West Lodge. At the northern end gravel paths lead from the garden into the area, which is planted with mixed trees and shrubs. The main trees are sweet chestnuts, beech, pines and evergreen oaks, with evergreen oaks and beech at the south-western end. Underplanting includes rhododendrons, hollies, and eleagnus. This area is unusual geomorphologically in that it contains sink or swallow holes in the underlying carboniferous limestone. These take the form of large holes with vertical or near-vertical sides. Holes in the rock at the bottom lead to an underground stream which emerges on the south side of the road, and which also feeds the mill leat. A path winds through the woodland down to a gate opposite the lodge. The area is bounded on the south-east by an iron fence as far as the garden ha-ha, and on the west by a ha-ha along the southern half and then by a low wall. On the east side of the southern end an old rockery made in the crevices, ledges and rock faces of a sink hole has recently been cleared, and it is now being replanted.

To the north of the house is the pleasure ground area of Chapel Hill. Incorporated into the layout is a small roofless fifteenth-century chapel, St Roque's Chapel, in which are two eleventh-century carved stones. This itself stands within a small Iron Age fort, the only visible remnant of which is a low bank encircling the hilltop. The woodland grounds cover the hill, with two fingers extending north and north-west. Like the southern pleasure ground this area includes a large swallow hole situated to the west of the chapel. Gravel paths, with dressed stone steps up from the forecourt and further east, lead into the woodland, and most are still open. Near the house there is a considerable amount of ornamental planting, with some fine specimen trees and shrubs, some recently planted. Two *Trachycarpus fortunei* flank the steps leading from the forecourt into the woodland. The tree canopy is mainly deciduous, with beech and oak predominating, and with many seedling trees in the western part of the area. There are also pines, particularly along the north boundary to the west of the chapel, evergreen oaks and a Californian redwood with ornamental shrubs beneath it. The chapel stands in a clearing on the level top of the hill with a lawn in front of it that was formerly laid out as a rockery. All that remains of this is a small stone-lined rectangular pool. Stone footings around the clearing formerly supported a rabbit-proof fence. From here a path leads westwards to an overgrown and partly destroyed rockery in a hollow area on the low ridge at the west end of the woodland. Some ferns, ornamental conifers, privet and lumps of water-worn limestone indicate former planting and layout. Above is the stone stump of a former summerhouse which is shown on the 1875-77 Ordnance Survey map. A lower path winds southwards from here through the wood near its west boundary. It passes a rockface, and towards the southern end is a ruined stone building known as the 'milk house' on the edge of the wood. This is off the path and may have had a utilitarian purpose. It too is shown on the 1875-77 map.

The garden and grounds were laid out by Sir John Nicholl between 1806 and 1838, at the same time as the park was made. The present layout differs in some respects from that shown on the William Weston Young estate map of 1813 and on a drawing of the same date by him: at that time there was a slope bounded by a semi-circular fence in front of the house, a fence extending to the west, a smaller verandah, and a 'greenhouse' to the west of the house, on the site of the present summerhouse. The map shows that at this stage the northern half of Chapel Hill was not yet wooded, that in 1813 the pleasure grounds did not extend south-westwards to the road, and that the garden to the west was laid out with a rather rococo design of waving paths and

irregular but symmetrical shrubberies. Further evidence of the development of the garden comes from a picture of *c.* 1860 showing grass terraces in front of the house, and the garden bounded by a stone-built ha-ha. A painting by Mary de la Beche Nicholl of 1867 shows island beds and bedding on the lawn and a view framed by trees to Ogmores Castle. By 1875-77 (Ordnance Survey map) the present layout is mostly in place: the northern half of Chapel Hill has been planted up; the pleasure grounds to the south-west are in existence and the original fussy design at their north end has gone. However, the terraces appear still to be grass slopes and the 'greenhouse' is still in existence to the west of the house. After this date the greenhouse was removed and the present summerhouse built in the early twentieth century, and probably at about the same time the present terraces were made.

The gardens of old Merthyr Mawr Hall

Along the western edge of the park, to the north of the Home Farm, are several walled compartments. These are the former gardens of Merthyr Mawr Hall, the house that preceded the present one. The Hall was situated on or to the south of the present Home Farm, and the 1794 estate map shows a walled 'pleasure ground' to the south, and a 'garden' and 'orchard' to the north. These enclosures correspond to those that remain today, and their rubble stone walls still stand, although all interior layout has gone. They occupy an elongated rectangular area orientated north-west/south-east, with the park boundary wall forming their western side. The southern end is divided into two compartments, the western one L-shaped, with doorways between them. A doorway near the east end of the north wall leads into the largest compartment to the north, which has rows of old fruit trees and conifers growing in it. The southern compartments are bare, with nothing growing in them except a few young trees.

The kitchen garden was built by Sir John Nicholl at the same time as, or soon after, the building of the house and stable court, between 1806 and 1838. It is a rectangular walled enclosure extending eastwards from the stable court, lying between the main drive and the garden. Its east wall extends southwards to form the east boundary of the garden. The brick and stone back wall of the stable block forms the west side. The walls stand to *c.* 3.5-5 m, with stone coping, and are built of stone on the outside and large bricks on the inside except on the south side, which is of stone throughout. The north wall has been raised with smaller bricks adding *c.* 0.5-1 m to the original height. There are stone lean-to bothies against the outside of the east end of the north wall. Doors or gates are situated towards the east and west ends of the north and south walls. The interior is laid out with lawns, vegetable beds, perimeter paths and a north-south gravel path leading to the door to the glasshouse.

Along the north wall, which retains much of its whitewashing, are the brick footings of a former cucumber house and vinery to the east, with vine arches at ground level. In the north-east corner are the brick walls of a sunken roofless former pit bed.

Sources

Primary

Plan of the estate of Charles Bowen decd in Merthyr Mawr, 1794 (private collection, E/126, 127).

A book of maps of Merthyr Mawr Place, by William Weston Young, 1813 (private collection).

Painting of Merthyr Mawr by William Weston Young (private collection).
Painting by Mary de la Beche Nicholl of Merthyr Mawr garden (private collection).
Plans for a grape-house (private collection E12a 23, 24, 25).
Plan for a grape pit (private collection E12a 22).
Planting lists of trees and shrubs (private collection E12a 15).
'Plan for mixing trees upon a square containing one hundred' (private collection E12a 14).

Secondary

Thomas, H.M., *Merthyr Mawr House* (1976).
Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Glamorgan, IV* (1981), pp. 341-42.
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