

# Powis Castle Garden

Welshpool, Wales

Photographs by Alan Ward 1999

# Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Powis Castle has been a strategic site for the princes who dominated southern Wales since before the Middle Ages. The castle was sited on high ground for defensive purposes on a location with a steep rock slope down to a valley, while the other three sides were protected by a moat. The construction of the present building began ca. 1200, and was built incrementally, until mostly complete about one hundred years later (1). The castle building has had very few changes since the fourteenth century, however, the landscape at Powis Castle has been revised and adjusted for almost eight hundred years.

Following the English Civil War that ended in 1651, and with the introduction of gunpowder, castles became essentially obsolete. In 1700 designer William Winde converted the landscape in the valley into pleasure grounds. The rocky slope was made into five terraces, resembling Italian Gardens, with each terrace a distinctly different design, including fruit trees on sloping topography at the lowest level. A series of garden steps connect the terraces to the castle. The valley floor was cleared and leveled to become elaborate gardens with ponds, fountains, topiary, and statues. Visitors likened it to the water gardens at Saint Germain-en-Laye outside Paris. Engravings from the period show a symmetrically ordered landscape design in contrast to the varied architectural massing of the castle, that was built much earlier.<sup>1</sup>

The next layer of design occurred in the late eighteenth century when the landscape was simplified. The extensive water gardens at the base of the terraces were removed to become the Great Lawn (1,5,7). Park planting framing the lawn, called the Wilderness, was also added to the site on the east bank overlooking the Great Lawn. The sculptural figures removed from the water gardens were repositioned on the Aviary Terrace (6).<sup>2</sup>

The last adjustments to the landscape were relatively minor and did not alter the fundamental layout of this Baroque period design. These changes occurred in the early twentieth century, when the terraces were characterized as having limited planting, so were replanted in the style of the time with new lawns, hedges and herbaceous perennials (2,8,9). A garden composed of rectangular spaces framed by hedges was added to the north end of the valley, replacing a kitchen garden to enhance views from the house (15,16). It includes the Yew Walk, featuring door-like openings in the hedges that lead to a lawn path between the yews (15).

This is a rare example of a design, pre-dating the landscape gardens of the eighteenth century, that has survived largely intact. Almost all of the Baroque gardens in Britain were significantly altered in the mid to late-eighteenth century. However, while the site

1. *Clwyd Powys Archeological Trust Regional Sites and Monuments Record*, Powis Castle, Garden, 2001

2. *Powis Castle* by Christopher Rowell and Jane Gallagher, National Trust, 1986

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has maintained its design and layout since the minor modifications in the early twentieth century, the most interesting feature of the landscape is the evolution of the planting. The yews on the upper terraces were planted ca. 1700. Photographs from the early twentieth century show these plants quite large and joined at the base, but still maintaining the conical form of each individual specimen. The yews have now grown to over thirty feet tall, extending out over the terrace walls and merging together, diminishing their individual form (1-4,11).

Even more dramatic is the boxwood walk, also called the Box Walk, where undulating walls of vegetation about twenty feet tall frame a narrow curving path (12). It is unlikely that this was the intended design expression. It is probably the result of benign neglect that has made these large evergreens now appear like flowing organic sculpture. The unusual and complex form of these large plants is recognized by the owners, The National Trust. The distinctive shapes of the boxwood are meticulously maintained with regular clipping by a team of skilled gardeners from platforms and ladders.<sup>3</sup>

By their very nature, works of the art of landscape architecture are composed of natural materials whose form evolves over time. As trees and plants grow, mature and die, they are replaced with another cycle of growth and decay. While the forces of nature influence

these designs, designed landscapes like Powis Castle, are also invested with values and references - sometimes with myths and stories from the past, as well as attitudes about the culture at the time they were created. At Powis Castle, the planting of yews and boxwood in the early eighteenth century, embedded meaning within the geometrically ordered shapes of these evergreens, embodying a landscape design popular at that time. The layout was inspired by Continental precedents, where nature was formalized with almost mathematical precision in symmetrical compositions of clipped plants in conical shapes, along with linear watercourses and basins adorned with sculpture. However, just as the other arts may change direction, cultural ideas may shift about the human relationship to nature, and how that relationship is expressed in landscape architecture.

One of the fundamental issues encountered in the design, redesign and preservation of landscapes is deciding what should be saved and what should change. The yews and boxwood at Powis Castle are plants that were valued and retained, however, they have grown and transformed into something with new significance as both meaningful symbols of strength and longevity, as well as flowing shapes that appeal to a contemporary sense of beauty in landscape architecture (12).

3. *Powis Castle* by Christopher Rowell and Jane Gallagher, National Trust, 1986

# List of Photographs

1. Powis Castle from the east bank
2. Upper terrace and Powis Castle
3. Upper terrace and base of castle
4. Upper terrace with sculpture of Hercules killing Hydra
5. View northeast over Great Lawn and gardens
6. Aviary Terrace, sculpture of Shepherds and Shepherdesses
7. View from Aviary Terrace to Orangery Terrace
8. Path with box hedges on Orangery Terrace
9. Curving path on Orangery Terrace
10. Steps from Orangery Terrace to apple slope
11. Path through ancient clipped yews
12. Serpentine box walk
13. Steps from terraces to Great Lawn
14. Bench along terrace
15. View from Orangery Terrace to yew walk and gardens
16. Fountain garden
17. Stable pond near ice house



































# Notes

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