

## PLAS BRONDANW, MERIONETH—II

### THE HOME OF MR. CLOUGH WILLIAMS-ELLIS

By CHRISTOPHER HUSSEY

*The garden, begun in 1908 on formal lines, has been developed continuously, latterly with increasing attention to visual qualities of design.*

"I WAS in the antiquarian phase," Mr. Williams-Ellis has said referring to the distant days of 1908-14 when he began restoring his family's old home in Snowdonia's foothills. Its rebuilding in 1951-53, after fire had gutted the house, enabled the owner-architect to give much more care to practical and economical planning. Yet it certainly cannot be said that the romantic character of the house has been noticeably diminished. The difference now is that the two aspects, the sentimental and the rational, have been combined through a greater degree of visual planning.

Neither of those words, and the ideas they denote, were in general circulation in 1908; but together they best describe the "phase" Mr. Williams-Ellis arrived at eventually, and no less the essential change that has taken place in our attitude to everything connected with architecture during the half century. Indeed, he himself, as architect, writer, broadcaster and apostle of rural preservation, has played a foremost part in bringing about that change. In the garden that he has been making on and off throughout these years the same change and fusion of values can be traced; though no such reconstruction has been necessitated as for the house. The greater part of it remains, and has been extended, as the same kind of garden that was begun. The wildly picturesque setting, the stony terrain and contours still prompt scenic and practical analogies with old Italian villa gardens, formal in design, with the accent on shape and pattern, and relatively little horticulture. Yet the emphasis in the more recent parts is different from that in the earlier; and features that used to be outstanding seem less important than others subsequently introduced. One reason for this, of course, is that much has grown up, the hedges and cypresses

literally, and other pleasurable designs figuratively, to divert the eye. But at the same time I think we have all become less interested in the antiquarian aspect of gardening, and with architecture in gardens, than by garden architecture, visual planning; that is, the shaping of the garden.

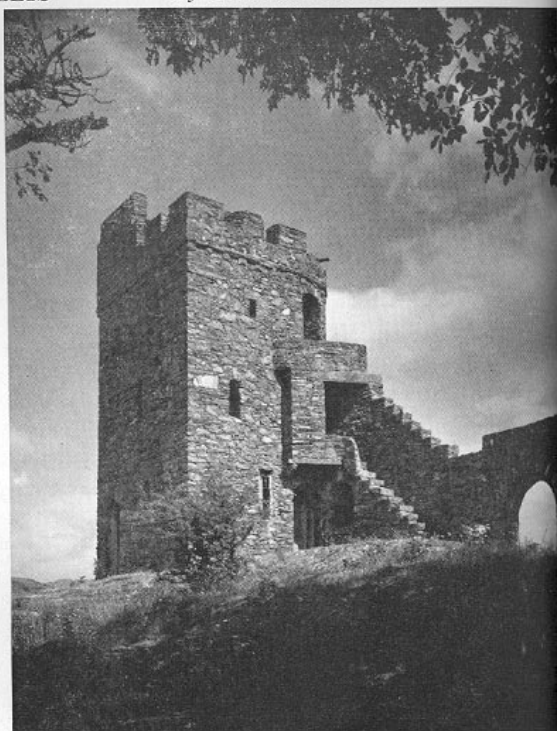
When Brondanw was described here in 1931, I remember being delighted by the romantic gatehouse at the entrance to the domain, rather Scottish in Lorimer's style. In the garden the most important thing then seemed to be the massive little orangery at its south-west corner (Fig. 5). Both these components, built in 1914, are still engaging and play a rôle in the scheme, but the rôles have become relatively less significant. We expect, and find, things more visually interesting.

Chief of these is the relationship of house, garden and landscape. This aspect is greatly enhanced; though I miss a pair of gate-piers at the head of steps descending from the forecourt to the main terrace, which stood out grandly against

the mountains across the valley. They are still there, but are now covered with creepers. The appearance of the house and its connection with the garden have been very much improved by the buttressing addition that had to be made in 1937 to its west side (Figs. 2 and 12). It gives focus to this elevation, stops the eye from glancing off it when seen at an angle (Fig. 4), and has the effect of tying house and garden together—the terrace walk tunnels through it.

As set out in the plan (Fig. 9), the garden falls neatly into three areas corresponding to phases of time and taste. The first, 1908-14, is represented by the forecourt, and the rectangle west of and below it (Fig. 2). This originally consisted in little more than a sloping lawn contained by hedges, with the orangery at the south-west corner, and several fine old trees, among them a handsome ilex (Fig. 12). In the second phase, roughly 1920-35, this rectangle was extended north and south. The flagged terrace, which starts at the stables (Fig. 3), was extended northwards to end in a round belvedere giving a glorious panorama of mountains over the thick low wall enclosing it (Fig. 7). On the axis of the terrace a dipping-well has a platform over it reached by steps which also serves as a stile if one wants to get over into the field beyond. The whole feature is delightful garden architecture of the '30s.

In the other direction, south of



1.—"CASTEL BRONDANW": THE OUTLOOK TOWER ON THE HILL ABOVE THE HOUSE



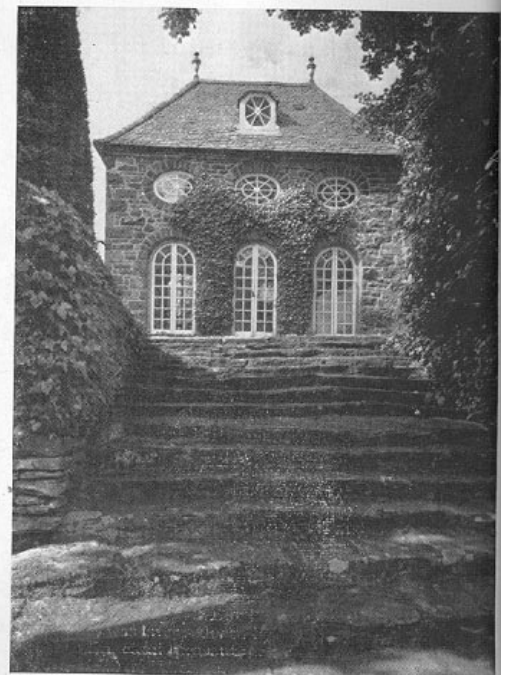
2.—ON THE ORANGERY STEPS: THE HOUSE AND GARDEN FROM THE SOUTH-WEST



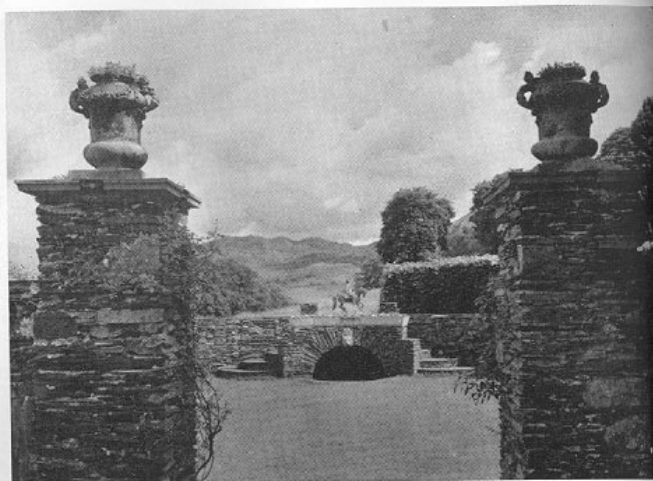
3.—LOOKING SOUTH TOWARDS THE STABLES AND ORANGERY



4.—A WALK ALIGNED ON THE PEAK OF CNICT



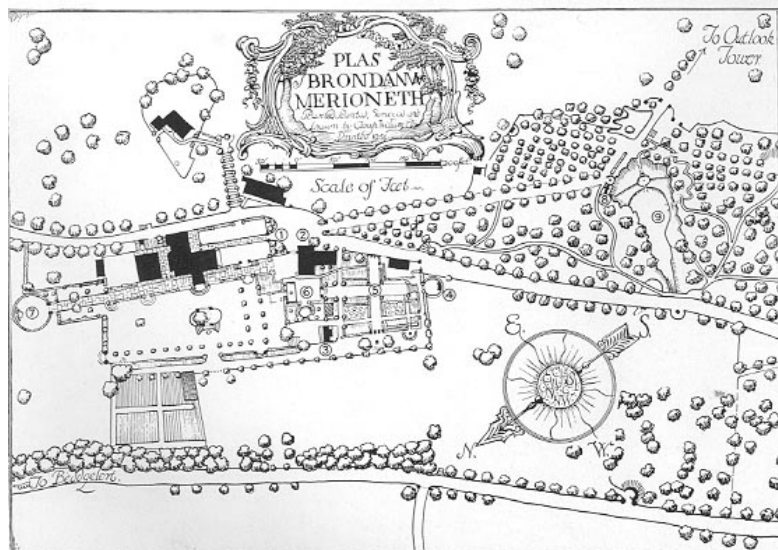
5.—THE ORANGERY, BUILT IN 1914



(Left) 6.—THE FOUNTAIN POOL. (Above) 7.—THE BELVEDERE ROUND  
AT THE NORTH END OF THE TERRACE

he original lawn, a yew-hedged flower-garden was completed. It has two main alleys at right angles, of which that going north-south has at its south end a raised roundel enclosed by a honey-suckled parapet. We are looking out of this, called the Apollo belvedere from the statue that lives there, through a leafy arch in Fig. 8.

Northwards, as the ground rises, this alley ascends a semi-circle of steps between masonry piers (Fig. 4) to a little square and fountain: in Fig. 6 we are looking back over the pool, which contains the ever-leasing fire-boy figure (squirting the fountain from his hose) modelled by Gertrude Knoblock. This alley is not parallel but at a slight angle to the longer main terrace. A difficulty with the latter was that, having to be parallel with the house-front, it could not be aligned on the dramatic silhouette of Cnicht, the mountain that is the *don* of the view northwards. But, by slewing this hedged enclosure through a few degrees, this alley could be, and, as Fig. 4 shows, is, aimed straight at Cnicht's peak.



9.—PLAN. 1, Entry gate to forecourt and house. 2, Stables. 3, Orangery. 4, Apollo belvedere. 5, Cross alleys in the yew garden. 6, The fountain lawn. 7, Belvedere roundel terminating the terrace. 8, The fire memorial. 9, Quarry pool

8.—THE YEW WALK FROM THE SOUTH  
ROUND

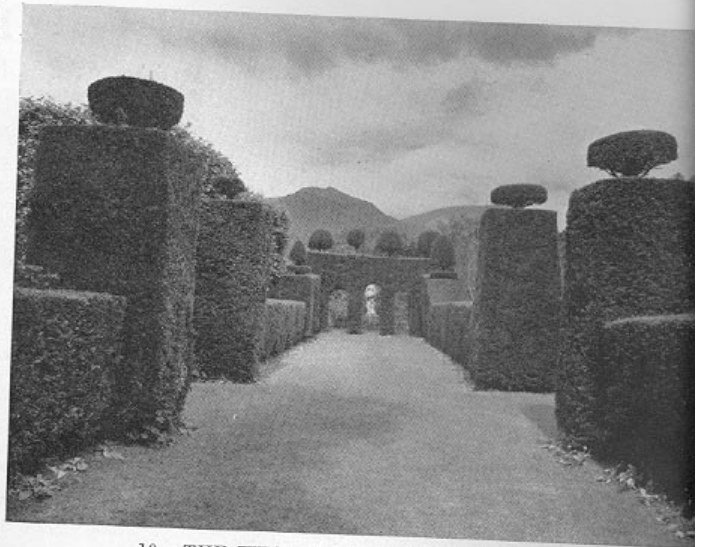
The cross alley has Moel Hebog as its distant object (Fig. 10), but its east end runs into the hillside below the drive (Fig. 13). There a masonry frontispiece houses three statues, the arches of which are repeated in yew at the other end, serving also to provide that traditional device of garden designers—partial closure of a vista to heighten expectation, and to contrast with the uninterrupted length of the north-south alignments. The degree of variety combined with the formal lay-out of this part of the garden is a testimony to its quality as garden architecture. I am less happy about the steps, piers and urns, under the ilex and leading to a platform made in the sloping lawn (Fig. 12), aligned on the "buttress," but not related to anything else. On the other hand, Mr. Williams-Ellis nearly always succeeds in getting his masons to produce lovely texture. This quality is a *leitmotif* running all through the garden, most evident in the roughly flagged paths, but just as effective in the more carefully patterned cobbles and slabs in the front door path (Fig. 11).

This leads, through the entrance gates and across the approach road, into the third area and phase of the garden, which has

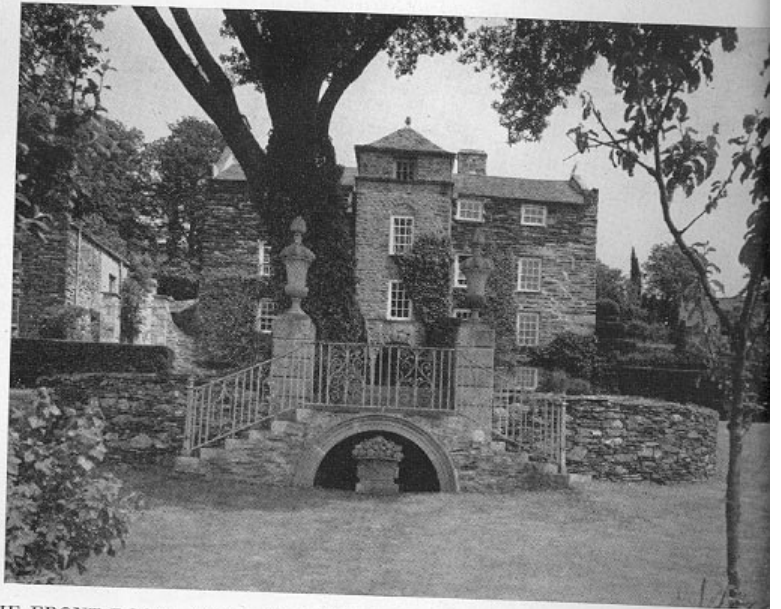
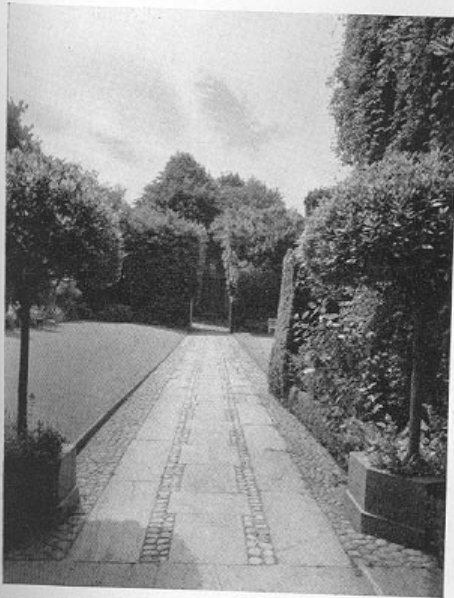


largely taken shape since the war. This area is entirely Picturesque, consisting in limited but forceful excursions into the rocky, wooded hillside. It suggests that Mr. Williams-Ellis, as garden designer, has passed through the same phases as did 18th-century planners, from building objects in a formalised setting, through the enhancing of the "genius of the place," to composing romantic scenery. The avenue is lined with chestnuts, actually planted half a century ago, and climbs diagonally up through young plantations to a point where a chasm formed by an old quarry overhangs a natural pool. It is there that the flaming urn monument to the burning and rebuilding of the house, illustrated last week, is dramatically perched. Thence a path climbs out of the wood over boulder-strewn grass till it gains the hill's crest. There, in the authentic spirit of Squire Headlong and of all the view-mad Regency landowners who turned their estates into landscape pictures, Mr. Williams-Ellis has built perhaps the last of genuine follies (Fig. 1), a prospect tower surveying the panorama of estuary and mountains.

The tower looks convincingly like a ruined castle, though the scale of the building is really about half what it seems; about 25 ft. high, instead, as we might suppose, at least 50. Built largely of stone gathered from the site, it has floors of reinforced concrete providing three low rooms, the fourth storey being open to the sky. Its building was



10.—THE WEST END OF THE CROSS ALLEY



11.—THE PATH IN THE FORECOURT FROM THE FRONT DOOR. (Right) 12.—THE WEST FRONT FROM BENEATH THE ILEX



13.—THE EAST END OF THE CROSS ALLEY

partly occasioned by the desire, during uncertain times between the wars, to keep together in some employment the little band of estate masons, when any more constructive building, either at Portmeirion or Brandanw, was held up.

But in fact, Mr. Williams-Ellis tells me, "it belatedly bodied forth the handsome wedding present from my fellow Welsh Guardsmen in 1915, when I persuaded my commanding officer that they should subscribe to a ruin that I wanted instead of to a piece of silver plate that I did not." Entirely visual as its purpose was and is, "Castel Brondanw" can claim to have served a military purpose in so far as the Home Guard used it as a post. Its peaceful function is to add the sweep of Tremadoc Bay from Harlech to Pwllheli and the panorama of the Snowdon giants round to Rhinog Fach above Dolgelley, to the more introverted pleasures afforded by the older garden's enclosures.

So all moods are provided for by this garden, which is both contemporary and historic. It is contemporary in its limiting labour to what can be done mechanically—mowing and clipping—and in its development of visual design; historic in its restatement of garden-making's succeeding phases in past centuries, the changing preferences for which reflect the movement of taste in our own time.