

# A pleasant seat restored

*Aberglasney, Carmarthenshire*

The part-restoration of the 1720 house at Aberglasney and the rediscovery of its unique cloister garden make for an uplifting story in the grand narrative of Welsh buildings, argues Harry Mount

Photographs by Paul Barker

**I**N the mid 1990s, prospects looked bleak for a house that had played a crucial part in the history of the British landscape. Aberglasney was the childhood home of the early-18th-century poet John Dyer, whose writing pioneered the Picturesque appreciation of landscape and ruins. Fifteen years ago, his home was itself a ruin. The roof was rotting away, its plasterwork waterlogged or looted, the roof timbers scorched by vandals' fires. And the last-surviving cloister garden in Britain was lost to the world, buried under 6ft of earth and topped with a head-high jungle of bramble and Japanese knotweed.

Now, thanks to the efforts of a local buildings enthusiast, an anonymous American philanthropist, Cadw and the Heritage Lottery Fund among others, Aberglasney has taken its place again among the impressive castles and country houses that crest the hills either side of the meandering Towy River, 20 miles north-west of Swansea.

The garden has been cleared and replanted in an imaginative scheme by Graham Rankin and Penelope Hobhouse that unites the early-17th-century design with 21st-century innovation. The façade of the house has been

restored, its ground floor given over to a meeting room and an art gallery. Already, the estate, run by a private trust, turns a profit, with thousands of visitors a year.

The origins of the house are shrouded in mystery. According to the Welsh bard Lewis Glyn Cothi, writing 500 years ago, there were on the site 'nine green gardens, orchard trees and crooked vines, young oaks reaching up to the sky'. In the 15th century, the property was owned by the ap Thomases, a distinguished Welsh family. It seems that Sir William ap Thomas sold the house to its most famous owner, Bishop Anthony Rudd, in about 1600, when it became known as Aberglasney.

Little survives of that house—although it is known from old accounts that there was a chapel in one wing. But what does survive is Aberglasney's chief claim to fame—its cloister garden (**Fig 6**), thought to have been built from about 1600 onwards. This fills up three sides of a 98ft by 148ft rectangle on the south side of the house; the house itself closes the fourth side.

The enclosing arcaded stone ranges provide a broad parapet looking back to the house, down to the cloister garden beneath ➤



← *Fig 1 left:* Early-17th-century, diaper-patterned cobbles lead from the gatehouse arch to the restored cloister garden, the last-surviving example of its kind in Britain and once buried under 6ft of earth and bramble.

→ *Fig 2 facing page:* The view past the early-17th-century gatehouse of Aberglasney to the restored west front of 1715



and, in the other direction, out towards the Towy Valley. They appear to have been built in different stages, with two sides only having scalloped embrasures at the top. It seems that the main west range, with its elaborate cloister, was built by the bishop. The other two sides, less sophisticated, with deep recesses only, may have been added by his son.

The roots of the cloister garden are hard to untangle. Certainly, its Renaissance-inspired formality was fashionable at about the time that Elizabeth I was succeeded by the Stuarts. Italian 16th-century gardeners used arcades and terraces in abundance, and Hadrian's early-2nd-century AD villa at Tivoli, just outside Rome, had a splendid cryptoporticus—a covered walkway. In 1685, Sir William Temple described a cloister-like garden at Moor Park, Hertfordshire, completed by Lucy Harington in 1627.

In the absence of any surviving plan, Mr Rankin, Aberglasney's director of operations, opted for a copy of a cloistered garden in a painting of a Lady of the Byng Family of Kent. Mr Rankin's parterre is typical of an early-17th-century garden layout, fringed with orange trees in lead planters—oranges have been grown in Wales since the late 16th century, and the warm shelter of the cloister garden provides the ideal summer enclosure.

Also belonging to the early 17th century is a free-standing gatehouse (Fig 2) to the north of the cloister garden, with a vaulted passage and a moulded arch. On each side, it bears the scars of missing gables, which give the impression that single-storey wings stretched from the gatehouse to make an enclosed courtyard. Similar structures survive from about 1600, notably at Cors y Gedol in Merioneth. Newly exposed diaper-patterned cobbling leads from the gatehouse towards the cloister garden (Fig 1).

By 1670, the house had 30 hearths, making it one of the largest in the county. But, through the 17th century, the Rudd fortunes declined, until the 2nd Baronet was forced to sell the estate in 1710 to Robert Dyer, who embarked



↑ Fig 3: The entrance portico of Aberglasney, dating from about 1840, was illegally removed during the house's decline, but saved from auction by an eagle-eyed local antiquarian

on a grand modernisation programme.

By about 1715, the house, built around a small courtyard, took on its current form, with the addition of the grand entrance front (Fig 3)—a three-storey, nine-bay elevation with cambered-headed sash windows. On the south façade, two low towers suggest an earlier courtyard house with corner towers.

Robert's son, John (1699–1757), was brought up at Aberglasney. Rejecting his father's plans for him to become a lawyer, he took up painting in London and Rome. But it was as a poet, back at home in Aberglasney, that he achieved fame, writing about the domed hill opposite the house—Grongar Hill, which gave its name to his poem of 1726.

In *Grongar Hill*, Dyer was the first poet to write in a Picturesque way about ruins and landscapes. Dyer's poem described not only Grongar Hill, but also the view from Aberglasney westwards down the valley,

with a series of crumbling castles perched on crags above the meandering River Towy: The pleasant seat, the ruin'd tower, The naked rock, the shady bow'r, The town and village, dome and farm, Each gives each a double charm.

Among the pleasant seats and ruined towers in the enchanting Towy Valley these days is the National Botanic Garden of Wales, built in 2000, around the site of Samuel Cockerell's Middleton Hall of 1795.

Aberglasney grew more elaborate in 1803, when it was bought by Thomas Phillips, a nabob and former head surgeon to the East India Company. It was Phillips' heir, John Walters who, in about 1840, added the Ionic portico to the north entrance range, threw out

→ Fig 4 facing page: The Ninfarium, a collection of temperate and sub-tropical plants in a glassed-in part of the house



### The bishop who lost a cathedral

Anthony Rudd (about 1548–1614), from Yorkshire, rose to become the Dean of Gloucester and looked set for great things on being appointed to the rich See of St David's in 1594. There was talk of his becoming Archbishop of Canterbury until the inauspicious day when he chose to give a sermon that drew attention to the ageing Elizabeth I. His comment that age had 'furrowed her face and bespeckled her hair with its meal' did not go down well.

Given that other bishops of St David's were buried in the cathedral, it was perhaps Rudd's lese-majesty that meant he was buried instead in the parish church of Llangathen, on the hillside above Aberglasney. His ornate Palladian bedstead tomb, with Corinthian columns, Ionic aedicules and his coat of arms, survives—of the typical late-16th-century variety, it is modelled on those being mass-produced at the time in London's Southwark workshops.



a protruding bay on the garden front, built the double-height entrance hall with its consoled 19th-century cornice, and had his coat of arms painted in a stained-glass window in the hall—now restored after damage in the 1970s. In 1870 came the six cages by the cloister garden, originally designed for breeding ornamental pheasants, and now used to protect strawberries from the birds.

The house stayed with descendants of the Phillips family until 1955, when it began its steep decline. The estate was split up, the house left empty, and damp, decay and vandals brought the building to its knees by the early 1990s. In 1993, the portico appeared in a Christie's auction catalogue, only to be spotted and saved by a local landowner and antiquarian, Andrew Threipland. One silver lining to the temporary removal of the portico was that it revealed a handsome Queen Anne roundel hidden behind the pediment.

Things looked bleak until the arrival of the Aberglasney Restoration Trust in 1995, under the guidance of the patron saint of Carmarthenshire's endangered buildings, William Wilkins. From 1995–99, Craig Hamilton was in charge of the restoration, renovating only the garden façade and the porticoed range to begin with. In 2005, Mr Rankin imaginatively gave over the rear of the house to the Ninfarium (Fig 4), a glassed-in collection of temperate and sub-tropical plants, including orchids, palms, magnolias and cycads. Mr Rankin adopted the name from the garden at Ninfa (COUNTRY LIFE, September 20, 2007), southwest of Rome, planted by the Caetani family in the ruins of a medieval village.

In 1998, in the old kitchen garden—now the Upper Walled Garden (Fig 5)—the garden designer and historian Penelope Hobhouse came up with a scheme of concentric ovals of box in the form of a Celtic cross. The structural planting uses evergreens known from Bishop



↑ Fig 6: Bishop Rudd's early-17th-century cloister garden with its splendid raised walkway. It has been restored according to a painting of a Lady of the Byng Family in Kent

Rudd's time, notably clipped box for the outlines. Next door, the kitchen garden was designed by Hal Moggridge as a formal rectangular layout with box-edged beds.

Behind the house, Mr Rankin has planted an alpinium, echoing the late-18th-century garden at Hafod near Aberystwyth, planted by Thomas Johnes. Local limestone was used to create a series of raised beds. These permit smaller plants, such as dianthus and dwarf-growing daphnes, to be examined close at hand. Autumn-flowering gentians were planted beside the rare Japanese holly *Ilex crenata* Dwarf Pagoda and the slender fastigiate yew *Taxus baccata* Green Column.

Beside this garden, Bishop Rudd's Walk, leading to the church in Llangathen, is planted with Asiatic magnolias, trilliums, large tree

ferns, primulas, meconopsis, hardy orchids and numerous bulbs. Also here is the Asiatic Garden, rich in plants from China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Nepal. In 2004, a raised mound was built at the top of the garden with fine views west to Merlin's Hill and Carmarthen.

Leading down from the entrance façade is another rarity—a yew tunnel, of six trees trained down to the ground to form an arch. Dendrochronology has revealed that they were planted in about 1724—at the height of the Dyer renovations. Further south-west is the pool garden, bearing traces of a fountain in the pool, fed by rills from hidden watercourses. The origins of the pool are unknown, although its rectangular pattern fits with Jacobean precedents.

At the fringe of the property is the Stream Garden. Moisture-loving perennials are planted around a small pond, and a neighbouring wildflower meadow is being established, with *Fritillaria meleagris* and *Narcissus bulbocodium*. The stream leads down to a wood, packed with bluebells, orchids, ramsons and wood anemones. Next door is Pigeon House Wood, a plantation of deciduous trees from what looks like the early 1800s.

Last of all, a surprise—in 2004, William Pye dropped a Minimalist fountain into the yard of the 1870s farm buildings. Ranged around the fountain, the sunken garden is devoted to subtly coloured plants—among them, *Amomyrtus luma* with its aromatic foliage, and five different vacciniums (or blueberries).

This exceptional series of gardens trailing in all directions from the central cloister garden is a rare delight, all wrapped around the reborn house. Even Dyer, that old ruin obsessive, would have appreciated this triumphant retrieval of beauty from decay. 🐾



↑ Fig 5: Penelope Hobhouse's scheme in the Upper Walled Garden sets concentric ovals of box in the form of a Celtic cross. Beyond lies the picturesque Towy valley