

A Garden to Visit

NORTH WALES: Plas Brondanw

Plas Brondanw is one of those gardens that walks a fine line between private and public. It flirts with the visitor, provoking us to come down one way or the other on a firm opinion about it. Consequently, you can find yourself growing quiet, introspective, caught up in unfamiliar thoughts. I think this is deliberate. The garden's creator, Clough Williams-Ellis, was a complex character and here, in his personal space, you get to grapple with the physical manifestation of those immaterial qualities that reside in all of us: our deepest motivations, passions, tastes and preferences.

So powerfully expressed and deliberately designed is this space that you wonder if you might catch a ghostly glimpse of its creator, quietly enjoying his creation, revelling in its confident, bold maturity, reluctant to leave this space at all! For, if ever an autobiography can be written with the humble contents of a garden: plants, layout, context, features and imagination, this is it.

One thing I have grasped here in North Wales, is that a garden must establish its *raison d'être* quickly, proudly and confidently or it will fade and stutter (and sometimes disappoint) against such a vivacious and breathtaking mountainous backdrop. In its extraordinary setting, at the upper reaches of the Glaslyn estuary, and in the foothills of the Moelwyn range, Plas Brondanw is a masterclass in how to punch above its weight to claim and involve its majestic setting.



Topiary and screening, both evergreen (in the form of Yew and conifers) and deciduous (in the form of Hydrangea and Acer) nod to Williams-Ellis' love of the renaissance gardens of Italy, with their emphasis on romantic and idealised forms and settings.

This is an axial garden, wide but not deep, on a steeply sloping hillside. And by some accident of fate (or probably not, knowing what little I do of Williams-Ellis' work), the northerly 'endpoint' of the longer axis stretches beyond the garden to anchor Wales' Matterhorn, the *Cnicht* firmly into the space.

Deliberately but playfully framed between solid and unbending avenues of trees and clipped hedges, the vista is quite breath-taking. Astonishingly, Williams-Ellis has reversed our normal perceptions. What are usually considered heavy, static and brooding elements in the landscape have been upended in our understanding of what we see. Somehow, through the carefully planted landscape in the foreground, he has made the mountain beyond it look light and ephemeral in comparison.

For me, this garden doesn't depend on the weather to enjoy its gifts. It depends more on the mood you find yourself in beforehand. If you want to 'clear the cobwebs', think anew on something, be inspired by the work of a sheer force of nature or to see a familiar view in an unfamiliar way, then make a date with Plas Brondanw.



Directions: LL48 6SW, Garreg Llanfrothen, N. Wales
(4 miles from Porthmadog) t: 01766 770000. Open all year.