

Special Characteristics of the Site

- Gnoll Estate Country Park is located on a prominent, steep sided hill on the East side of Neath that steps out from the natural topography of the valley, thereby historically offering dramatic views to the South, North and West
- Despite its prominent location, the site still feels nestled down in its landscape, largely screened from the openness of the broad valley bottom and from prevailing winds by dense mature woodland and the surrounding topography.
- The surrounding landscape reflects in some capacity, almost all aspects of change that has been undertaken in the Vale of Neath in the last 300 years.



The site offers extensive views of the surrounding designed landscape whilst lying relatively sheltered on its plateau. Relics and memories of the House together with the industrial processes and materials are never far away

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARK

The significance of the park has been established by the Conservation Management Plan, dated April 2022, by Ian Baggott of CFP - a specialist parks, green space and heritage consultancy. This states

'The Gnoll's current designations give an indication of its significance in the fact that it is a Grade II registered park and garden and that it contains a further 3 Grade II listed buildings / features.'*

The primary reason for grading is also clear it is registered for "the survival of its largely eighteenth-century landscape park, which is of great historic interest, in its original rural setting above Neath."

There is also its industrial connection throughs Humphrey Mackworth's creation of pools for his industry below and possible remnants of mills on site.'

More specifically the park illustrates the following qualities that demonstrate its heritage significance and which must be protected in any future development of the ruins and its environs:

'As a Surviving 1720 / 1740s Landscape Design in Wales

It is not known how many 1720s landscape designs have survived in Wales, the most often cited examples are in England e.g. Castle Howard near York, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, both by Stephen Switzer. There has not been time during this commission to fully explore this and it certainly warrants further exploration.

This era is sometimes called transitional or the very early stages of the English Landscape Design which became famous later under Repton.

As a Work of Thomas Greening

The two transcribed letters lead us to the connection between Herbert Mackworth before the inherited the estate and Thomas Greening (1684-1757). We do not know how Mackworth had lived in London nearer to Greening's nursery in Brentford.

Greening was working for Sir James Bateman at the time at Shobdon Herefordshire (about 70 miles North East over the Brecon Beacons) and he also bought a farm there himself. His work there is thought to have begun around 1720-21.

Greening was an exceptional plantsman – known to be an expert in growing dwarf apples in tub and pots, peaches, nectarine and espalier apricots. He also grew elm trees for which he gained a royal patent in 1720 for grafting English Elm on to Dutch elm stock for faster growth.

He was also involved in the 1720s in landscaping the gardens of Richmond Lodge, now part of Kew Gardens, for Queen Caroline working with Charles Bridgeman. It is likely that his contract there was more management rather than new design. He also worked at Claremont at this time with William Kent. Virtually all of his work at both sites has disappeared and it has not proved possible for specialists to decipher his work as still remaining at Richmond Garden or Kew Gardens.

He went on to become gardener for King George II, Lord Weymouth and the Duke of Marlborough.

There is reference in the letter of 25th September 1727 to Herbert Mackworth of creating a ‘semicircular theatre’. One such example was known to be created at Richmond Lodge using elms and is shown on the Rocque print of 1748.

The CADW listing also refers to the layout being “in the style of Stephen Switzer” which is in turn encapsulated in his book Ichnographia Rustica.

Thus, the main components of Greenings design appear to be the main axis connecting the house to the Ha Ha and its view beyond to the formal cascades. There is a significant difference in height at the western end of

the axis and its alignment north of the house manet that there would not be any views from the house down the avenue. Immediately next to the axis is the irregularly laid out gardens, all paths are curved and several link to a circular features later referred to as both a bowling green and later a croquet lawn. The formal cascades also would have been part of the design but were implemented slightly later in the 1740s.

Thus, in conclusion, this may be the only Thomas Greening design still in existence in the UK which makes it of national significance.

Cultural and Historical Significance to the Development of Neath

The Gnoll most for very long the most important house in Neath. Its connections to the town date back to at least 1666 and the successive owners made their considerable wealth from the labour of the people of the area. Evan yr Halen’s connection to the salt trade, the Evans family’s initial coal mining and Humphrey Mackworth’s copper smelting all not only shaped the house and landscape of the Gnoll but also the surrounding area. The pools and waterways are a legacy of the industrialisation very early in the 1700s. There are quite possibly the remains of mills and other workings on site that require further exploration.

The current community of Neath have a great affection with the Gnoll and families have strong connections going back generations. This is a huge untapped resource not only in developing the stories of the Gnoll but also in securing the future of the park. The current Friends group consists of about 5 people and the council have virtually no volunteer engagement. Recent consultation shows that learning about the history of the Gnoll is one of the top 2 priorities.

Ecological significance

The Gnoll Country Park is designated a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) (NPTSINC036) by the Local Planning Authority

through the Local Development Plan (2011- 2026). SINC's, also known as Local Wildlife Sites, are sites with local biodiversity value vital to declining plant and animal populations by providing habitat and facilitating dispersal. Damage or loss to a site designated a SINC should be avoided or mitigated if unavoidable.

The Gnoll was designated for its ancient woodland habitat and characteristic ground flora. The south of the site is characterised by broadleaved woodland, some of which is designated on the Ancient Woodland Inventory. The woodland features species such as beech (*Fagus spp.*) and woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), a priority species. The latter is a flowering perirenal and indicator species of ancient woodland. The broadleaved woodland is a priority habitat within the country park and supports notable species including Daubenton's bats (*Myotis daubentonii*).

The Gnoll Country Park features a range of other habitats, some of which are also key habitats and a high conservation priority. These include seven ponds created in 2009. They are a priority habitat and support a myriad of wildlife, including notable species such as the brown or sea trout (*Salmo trutta trutta*). Several grassland areas have also been improved as part of the Council's Bee Friendly Scheme and were seeded to increase species diversity. Some of the built features at the country park, including walls and buildings, also provide vital habitat for bats, including common pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) and soprano pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*).

It is also worth noting that, in addition to its SINC designation, the southern section of The Gnoll was identified as a Green Wedge in the Local Development Plan. Green Wedges are areas that are protected from inappropriate development to prevent urban coalescence, increase access to the countryside for residents and support biodiversity.

The Gnoll Country Park is also home to numerous priority and protected species, including 24 species listed under Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, which outlines species of "Principle Importance" to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity in Wales...

...Significance of individual Features

The country park has 3 listed features

- The Mosshouse Wood Cascades – Grade II
- The Grotto – Grade II
- The War Memorial – Grade II

The Former lodge and gates are thought to be outside of the park boundary and their management is unclear but as a further Grade III original element of the park they ought to be within the management of the park.

Other non-listed features have high significance such as:

- The Gnoll House ruins and associated features such as the ice house – to tell the story of life in the 1700s and 1800s. These are not well looked after and are very poorly interpreted
- The kitchen garden area with associated cottages – not fully explored as part of this work but part of the grade II* listing. Gnoll Cottage is in a serious state of decline but in private ownership and Fishpond cottage is currently vacant. This assemblage of buildings relate to the development of the estate being for food growing, estate workers, bailiffs etc. All other late 19th century buildings have been demolished by the council'

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY VALUE

The social and community value of Gnoll Estate Country Park is derived largely from its association with Gnoll House and its contribution to the wider Neath area as a public leisure park. The parkland is a source of identity for people in Neath both as a historic site of beautiful parkland, and also as an accessible semi wild landscape that allows people to connect with nature. It is a significant place for leisure and interaction, and the focus of the immediate community. It is also much appreciated by its visitors as an active centre within Neath, and also as a place of cultural and historical importance.

It is noted that although Gnoll House and some of its planting have been lost, most of the structural elements to the parkland remain intact or have been restored or rebuilt. The Gnoll Country Estate therefore continues to capture the imagination of and remains important to the local public. The landscape that the Cottage contributes positively to nowadays, fulfils various further roles within the wider community, as a location for objects of cultural, historical and environmental importance to the town, set amongst its numerous walks and trails. It is furthermore regularly visited by local children and caters specifically for all abilities.

The parks' social values are perhaps exemplified by the way that many of the people of Neath, together with visitors from outside the area, come to spend their leisure time within its boundaries. The tranquility of the landscape is clearly much appreciated.

Physical Issues

Gnoll Estate Country Park is generally accessible to all; the visitor centre and cafe are wheelchair friendly and there are disabled toilet facilities on site. The grounds around the Fishpond and the adventure playground have recently been renovated providing easy access to prams, wheelchairs and beamer tramper scooters as well as other paths and walkways around the park which are mainly flat and have a gravel surface.

To the wider site, the principal walks of Gnoll Estate Country Park are generally accessible, but present the typical problems of accessibility that accompany such historic parks and gardens when these are not followed.

Key visitor facilities are being developed as part of the wider proposals for Gnoll Park that build on the existing accessible facilities. The existing Visitor Centre is currently underperforming and not maximising the opportunities of its location within the parkland. The building however is the sole location for providing visitor facilities such as a café and toilets, within the park. Recognising this, the provision of an additional and alternative opportunity to provide additional facilities that result in services being more evenly distributed around the parkland, is a clear and demonstrably beneficial development to the function of the park.

KEY OUTLINE PLANNING CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

All Planning Applications for the site are supported by Planning Statement/Detailed Covering Letter by Asbri Planning and should be read in conjunction with this information which gives a detailed policy overview in terms of the proposals.

Policy Context

Planning Policy Wales provides the national planning policy context for Wales, supplemented by Technical Advice Notes (TANs), Welsh Government Circulars and policy clarification letters. Procedural guidance is provided in the Planning (Wales) Act 2015. Planning applications are typically decided in line with the local planning authority's (LPA) development plan. The development plan incorporates the local development plan for that area, and must have regard to the Wales spatial plan.

Central to the Planning Policy Wales is a primary objective of delivering sustainable development. Paragraph 1.2 of the document explains that 'The primary objective of PPW is to ensure that the planning system contributes towards the delivery of sustainable development and improves the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of

Wales, as required by the Planning (Wales) Act 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and other key legislation.

The proposed interventions at Gnoll Estate Country Park require Planning Consents to be sought from Neath Port Talbot Council. In planning terms the site sits within the open countryside. In determining the acceptability of any proposals in planning policy terms, due consideration will therefore

been given to the Planning Policy Wales and the Neath Port Talbot Local Development Plan (2011-2026).

The following sections are of particular relevance:

Strategic Policy SP1 – Climate Change

Strategic Policy SP2 – Health

Strategic Policy SP3 – Sustainable Communities

Policy SC2 – Protection of Existing Community Facilities

Strategic Policy SP4 – Infrastructure

Policy OS2 – protection of Existing Open Space

Policy SP13 – Tourism

Policy TO1 – Tourism Development in the Countryside

Policy EN3 – Green Wedges

Policy EN5 – Conversion and Extension of Existing Buildings in the Countryside

Policy EN7 – Important Natural Features

Policy SP18 – Renewable and Low Carbon Energy

Policy SP21 – Built Environment and Historic Heritage

Policy BE1 – Design

Local Development Plan

The Neath Port Talbot Local Development Plan 2011-2026 (Adopted January 2016) provides the local policy framework for the development and conservation needs of the area. In this respect the Council has an important role in securing the conservation of the historic environment

while ensuring that it accommodates and remains responsive to present day needs. This is a key aspect of the Council's wider sustainable development responsibilities, which needs to be taken into account in the exercise of development plan policy and development management functions.

Particular designations of note in relation to the site are:

- Green Wedge (Policy EN3): 'In order to prevent the coalescence of settlements and to protect the setting of urban area'
- Safeguarded Minerals (Policy M1) - area highlighted on the Council's interactive map. However, it should be noted that the document notes, 'In most instances, development may proceed within safeguarded areas as long as developers can demonstrate that the resource is of poor quality or quantity, that it can be extracted satisfactorily prior to any development taking place, that there is an overriding need for the development or that the scale and location of the development would not have any significant impact on the possible working of the resource.'
- Built Environment and Historic Heritage (Policy SP21/4 (6)): 'The built environment and historic heritage will, where appropriate, be conserved and enhanced...'

Wider policies of note in relation to design and tourism are:

- SP13 - Policy TO1 (Tourism development in the countryside)
- SP21 - Policy BE1 (Design): 'All development proposals will be expected to demonstrate high quality design which fully takes into account the natural, historic and built environmental context and contributes to the creation of attractive, sustainable places'

Registered Parks and Gardens

As amended by the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2016, the 1979 Act places a duty upon the Welsh Ministers to compile and maintain a register of sites of special historic interest in Wales that includes:

- parks
- gardens
- designed ornamental landscapes
- places of recreation
- other designed grounds.

The statutory register came into force on 1 February 2022, and replaces the non-statutory register. It includes nearly 400 sites across Wales and continues to be an active record, incorporating new sites as they are identified. The statutory register does not impose any new legal restrictions on Wales' historic parks and gardens or introduce a new consent regime. Registered sites continue to receive the current level of protection through the planning system.

The creation of the statutory register will not impose any new legal restrictions on Wales's historic parks and gardens or introduce a new consent regime. Registered sites will continue to receive the current level of protection through the planning system.

Local planning authorities are expected to take the register into account when preparing local development plans. The effect of a proposed development on a registered site or its setting may also be a 'material consideration' in the determination of a planning application.