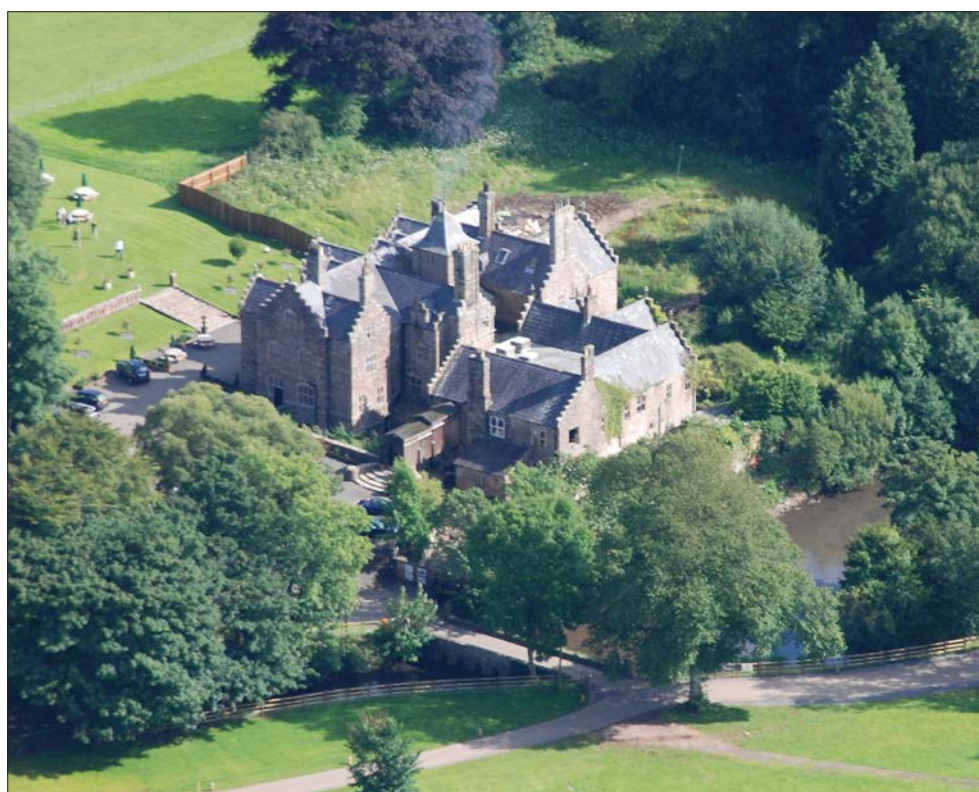


Archaeological Survey and Recording at Plas Coch, Llanedwen



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Plas Coch

Archaeological recording and assessment has been undertaken in advance of proposed demolition works in the Victorian period western block and in certain areas of the main building at Plas Coch, Llanedwen Anglesey. A record has been made by photography and measured survey in accordance with a brief prepared by Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service.

Introduction: a summary of the building sequence.

Plas Coch is a significant mansion house, first built, as we know it today, by Dafydd Llwyd ap Hugh in 1569 on the site of, or close to, the more ancient establishment of Porthamel Isaf. The house was very considerably remodeled by Dafydd's son, Hugh Hughes, in the last decade or so of the sixteenth century, in an innovative style which at once displays wide-ranging influences and marks the transition from the late medieval world to the modern in terms of the disposition and use of space in a gentry house.

The most striking outward appearance of the house is the ubiquitous red sandstone and gritstone of its construction, the profusion of crow-step gables and the pinnacles which surmount them, and the large stone mullioned and transomed windows and the Renaissance pediments which cap them.

In the 1830s or 1840s the house was enlarged with the addition of a northern wing to the facade and a large dining room at the western end of the south side. Additional structures were also added at about this time on the western side towards the area which was yet to become an ornamental lake. These structures included the building, known as the billiard room, on the north west side, behind the house, and a reversed L-shaped group of buildings springing from the west side of the dining room to enclose a courtyard. The lake had been created by the third quarter of the nineteenth century and the north-east - south-west range of the stables/coach-house across the lake, was probably added at this time.

The stone built structure, now dilapidated, close to the house on the eastern shore of the lake and next to the pump house was probably built close to the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century and so was the projecting wing on the south side of the range of buildings enclosing a courtyard at the back of the house. This is the wing now approached by steps, immediately to the west of the dining room. This remained, more or less, the plan, on the western side of the main house, through the first half of the twentieth century.

This complex of structures was built on two levels. The lie of the land slopes west towards the lake and the stream which supplies it and the lower ground floor, at the level of the lakeside is approximately 2.8m below the external ground surface of the ground floors in the main body of the house.

In the 1960s and 1970s the western complex of buildings was revamped for use as a bar and nightclub in association with the static caravan site which had developed over an extensive area of the grounds adjacent to Plas Coch. This remodeling involved the roofing over of the courtyard space and the gutting and removal of several of the rooms which had previously occupied this western complex. Access for the public, toilets, ventilation ducts and bar facilities were all inserted.

The western complex of buildings

As described above, this group of buildings came together over a period of time. The courtyard and 'billiard room' or its precursor were already in place by the 1840s. The southern wing, west of the dining room, was not built until some fifty years or so later. Nevertheless, when the north wing of the main facade of the hall was built in the 1830s or 1840s the style and character of the Tudor mansion was replicated in the new Victorian construction and integrated to such an extent that the old and the new are virtually indistinguishable. Elements of this style were carried through to the western complex. In particular, the consistent use of red sandstone, crow-stepped gables with pinnacles and, occasionally, classical mouldings such as triangular pediments and cavetto lintels. However, while maintaining an appearance of consistency the attention to detail which was applied in the north wing and dining room is less rigorously applied in the western block. The mouldings which define the steps of the gables have a more rounded cross-section than those on the eastern facade and on the dining room. The eastern and dining room pediments are sandstone and the mullions and transoms are ovolo moulded sandstone. In contrast, the pediment over the door (originally a window) of the south-western wing is moulded in cement as are the lintels of the upper ground floor windows. Several windows have been replaced in the western bloc but those which may be original Victorian, or perhaps early twentieth century replacements, replicate the sandstone mullions in wood.

The arrangement of the western block in the early twentieth century.

The accrual of structures between the main house and the lake form a pattern of components on two floors. On the lower ground floor the western facade opens out onto the ground surface bordering the lake. The eastern part of the lower ground floor is effectively a first floor on the western side, with an elevated view over the lake. The eastern side is slightly raised above the ground floor of the main house. The lower ground floor was, and still is, part basement with small semi-subterranean rooms on the southern side which must have served as cold storage or some similar function. Other rooms run around the periphery of a central rectangular space. Small compartments are ranged against the western wall. More spacious rooms occupy the northern part. The central area would seem to have accommodated piers for the support of an open courtyard space on the upper ground floor. Access to the lower ground floor would appear to have been gained from a staircase on the east side from the upper ground floor and from a corridor on the north east side via steps down from the main house.

The upper ground floor accommodated a central courtyard, 8.4m by 5.4m, flanked by a corridor on the south and west sides. The corridor gave access to rooms along the west wall lit by windows overlooking the lake. A larger room 6.9m by 3 to 4m, with a wide, pedimented, window, extended beyond the wall line centrally on the south side. This is the window now approached by modern steps to a door where the window once sat. Two small rooms with windows occupied the space to the east of the projecting wing and were accessed by the corridor from the passage leading from the main house at the back of the dining room. The northern wall was occupied by a large, almost square, room, 7.7 by 7.2m known as the billiard room. This room was accessed on the west side by the circulating corridor.

A description of features visible in the western block.

The southern side of the lower ground floor.

Four small dark rooms remain in the locations mapped by RCAHMMW in 1929. They appear not to have been used for some considerable time. The rooms are accessed from the lower ground floor central space. Three of these rooms stand against the main west wall, the fourth is disposed centrally and projects beyond the main wall, under the floor of the projecting wing on the south side of the upper ground floor. Room 1 was not accessible during the current assessment. Rooms 2 and 3 have no distinguishing characteristics. Room 4 has a thick slate table supported by bricks against the walls and openings blocked by bricks in the west and east walls. The openings still hold their metal window frames. Light was provided by two light wells, dug 2m down from the external ground surface against the south wall, either side of the projecting wing.

The small rooms against the west wall are occupied by two toilet blocks either side of a door and passageway 5-7m north of the north-west corner of the building, gentlemen to the south, ladies to the north. These lately served the clientele of the nightclub but might always have been used for a similar purpose. The toilets were each lit at a high level by two sets of small paired modern windows with metal frames, top-hinged, casement style. There are no significant features in this utilitarian facility other than the remnants of 1970s pop-art wallpaper which still cling to its walls.

At the northern end of the west wall there once was a room, 6m north-south, 2.7m west-east, lit by two large windows on the west wall and one large window on the north wall. The west wall windows have been replaced by modern neo-Georgian bow windows with small panes. The opening of the north window has for long been replaced by a wooden tongue and grooved door and vertically disposed lights, three above and one to the east of the door, in thick timber frames.

Two large rooms (7.80m north-south by 4.73m and 4.53m west-east respectively) are disposed along the north wall. These rooms have been gutted, as has the room to the west and the central space, to provide accommodation for the modern nightclub. Ragged holes have been knocked through the stone party wall of the two large rooms to provide a serving space for a drinks bar and to create a cavern-like atmosphere. An original window in the north wall of the eastern room survives in an opening 1.87m wide by 2.09m tall. The window has six lights, three above three, vertically disposed, separated by moulded wooden mullions and transoms. The central light in the top register is a casement, top-hinged. There are two doors in the east wall of this room. One is blocked, and was blocked when the RCAHMMW surveyed the building in 1929. The second door, immediately to the south, gives access to a passageway which runs along the outside of the east wall and also gives access, via stairs, to the northern Victorian wing of the main house.

The central lower ground floor space has been gutted and retains no characteristic or distinguishing features. The height of the ceiling here and in the peripheral rooms is 3.25m. The boards of the upper ground floor are 3.5m above the concrete of the lower ground floor. The upper ground floor is accessed directly from the lower ground floor by a stair from the east side of the central space.

The upper ground floor

The walls of the lower ground floor rise continuously to define the space of the upper ground floor. As with much of the lower ground floor, this space has been extensively cleared out and, in common with the lower ground floor, served the requirements of the recent nightclub. There are two main points of access. On the north side an enclosed timber bridge provides access to a door at the east end of the north wall. On the south side, five concrete steps lead up to a double door framed by brick jambs, centrally disposed in the south face of the projecting wing on that side. The bricks have blocked a wider opening which once held a wide timber framed window, surmounted by a classical pediment. The pediment, moulded in cement, survives above the modern door and defines the width and height of the original opening.

The only recognizable internal divisions which now survive within the upper ground floor space are a length of plastered masonry wall which extends from the south wing of the building on its east side. This wall once formed the east wall of the projecting wing. To the east of it, there were once two rooms, accessed by the corridor which circulated around the central open court. The only visible reminder of these rooms are two windows in the south wall, now occupied by matching casement style metal windows 1m wide by 1.22m tall. The original openings were 0.4m deeper at the base and are now blocked. The remnants of cavetto-style lintels, rendered in cement survive above the windows.

There were once five rooms ranged along the western wall overlooking the lake, each accessed by the circulating corridor. In addition, there was once a small room squeezed between the south-west corner room and the projecting wing. These rooms were lit by windows of different widths but similar heights and each was surmounted by a lintel with cavetto moulding. The four openings in the north half of the western facade no longer retain their windows. Those on the south wall, west end and the west wall, south end, and in the northernmost room in the north wall, have retained their frames, albeit in poor condition. Four have four lights each, two over two, disposed vertically and separated by timber mullions and transoms carrying ovolo moulding in reflection of the stone mullions of the main house where it is possible to establish, one of the upper lights in these windows opens as a top hinged casement. A larger window, of six lights, in the south wall, has the same features. It is reasonable to suppose that those openings which have lost their window frames, once carried the same style.

The 'billiard room' occupied the north-east corner of the upper ground floor. It was lit by two windows in the north wall and two windows in the south wall of the room which opened on to the central court. The westernmost of the windows in the north wall is now occupied by a modern wooden window frame with one of the two upper lights opening as a top-hinged casement. The other window has been replaced by the larger opening which provides a bridge access from the north side. No trace survives of the south or west walls of the billiard room. However, in this particular area on the upper ground floor, there is an arrangement of intersecting boxing suspended from the ceiling, in the manner of boxed beams. These boxes are decorative and carry elaborate plaster moulding which carries on to the ceiling as a cornice. These features are restricted to the area of the billiard room. There are no beams in these boxes except for a very slight and continuous beam above the location of the former west wall of the billiard room. This beam or beams continues the line from north wall to south wall, below which rises the partition of the eastern side of the circulating corridor. When the internal partitions were removed, in or around the 1960s, and the courtyard was roofed, it proved necessary to insert heavy steel girders beneath the north-south beam and, also, transversally from west to east, to support the roof. It is probable that, at the same time, the present ventilation ducts which run around the periphery of the upper ground floor at ceiling level, were inserted.

The present modern staircase access to the lower ground floor is adjacent to the bridge access from the north.

There are blocked doorways in the east wall at the north end and south end which, if opened, would give access to the ground floor of the main building to the east.

The chimneys

The western block carried three chimney stacks. One is disposed centrally along the west-east ridge line of the roof above the range to the south of the former courtyard. A second stack stands on the apex of the gable visible in the western facade at its north end. A third is the projecting stack which rises against the external north wall immediately to the west of the bridge access to the upper ground floor. There is no obvious evidence of fireplaces associated with any of these chimneys and the probability is that they are an architectural conceit.

Outside the west wall and north wall

In the area between the west wall of the complex under discussion and the lake, there stand two low structures which abut each other end to end. These structures stand approximately 1m from the west wall of the lower ground floor. The northernmost of the two is 10.5m north-south and 6m west-east. The construction is of limestone, red sandstone and gritstone and some local schist. There is a small projecting annexe, 2m by 1m on the north gable. These features were in place by the last quarter of the twentieth century. The structure is partly in ruins. Immediately to the south there is a modern brick annexe housing pumping equipment.

Outside the north wall there is a slate roofed, brick-built lean-to single storey shed appended to the north wall immediately to the east of the door close to the north-west corner of the western block. The shed overlaps the external chimney stack which rises against the north wall between the west window of the 'billiard room' and the bridge access to the upper ground floor.

Areas in the main body of the house

There are four areas in the main body of the house which are proposed for demolition or removal.

The first area is in use as a toilet on the first floor, immediately inside the late sixteenth-century kitchen extension. The demolition involves the removal of modern partition walls.

The second area is on the first floor of the late sixteenth-century porch wing. The demolition involves the removal of a modern stud and chipboard partition, extending across the width of the first floor room. The partition stands 1m from the east wall and oriel window and is pierced for doorway access to the window. The partition formed part of the arrangement of a small drinks bar servicing the 'Wedgwood' room at the back of the porch. The supports for liquor optics are still in place. The third area involves rooms on the first floor above the early Victorian dining room. The original design of this room involved lath and plaster partition at almost two-thirds along the length of the masonry structure. In modern times the larger component, on the south side was again subdivided with a stud and plasterboard partition and the insertion of a perpendicular partition to form a small corridor. The proposal for demolition is the removal of both the plasterboard partition and the lathe and plaster partition and corridor partition to expose the larger space.

The fourth area involves the space in the angle between the south wall of the kitchen extension, the west wall of the main house and the Victorian dining room. The proposal for demolition is for the removal of modern stud partitions which have annexed a part of this space for a gentlemen's toilet and for the removal of the toilet fixtures.

In respect of areas 1, 2 and 4 there should be no detrimental impact on the historic fabric of the building if care is taken in the processes of removal. The end result is likely to be beneficial. In respect of the rooms above the dining room there should be no detrimental impact if care is taken in the removal of the stud partition. The impact on the lath and plaster partition and the east (corridor) partition at the north end of this space will involve the removal of elements which are part of the Victorian fabric. However, the lath and plaster wall is damaged, the plaster is crumbling and the plaster moulding on the boxed roof beams and cornice have deteriorated. These features, including the Victorian door in the corridor wall are not unique and are replicated elsewhere in the building.

Summary and recommendations

This area of the Plas Coch complex developed over several generations from the initial early Victorian additions of the 1830s and 1840s. The western buildings provided a valuable amenity for the house which, in particular, included a billiard room, open courtyard and elevated views over the lake.

The character and style of the western block in its outward appearance of red sandstone, crow-stepped gables and pinnacles, ovolo-moulded windows and classical mouldings, was maintained, but not with the same vigour or materials as was the case with extensions closer to the main house.

During the later part of the twentieth century this complex was revamped. The open courtyard was roofed and the internal arrangements were gutted to service the requirements of a nightclub. Very few features of distinctive character, other than those on the external facades, survive.

The proposed demolition works which are the subject of this recording and assessment initiate a new phase of development at Plas Coch. The demolition works proposed include the removal of the sheds butting or adjacent to the western block, the removal of the unsightly timber bridge access to the complex, the removal of certain internal walls, the removal of ceilings, and the removal of the lower ground floor toilet block.

The western block -recommendations

The external elevations of the western block have been surveyed in plan and elevation and recorded by photography. Surviving window dimensions have been recorded and the timber-moulded window mullions have been recorded in profile. Early plans have been consulted for cross reference.

It is recommended that consideration be given to the maintenance of a watching brief during the demolition works and that notification of the stages and timetable of demolition works be notified to the archaeologist working for the architect, in this respect.

It is recommended that consideration be given to providing access for recording any features of significance which emerge during the present work. In this respect it is recommended that notification be given to the archaeologist to record, by photography, the Victorian roof trusses when exposed during the demolition works.

The areas in the main block -recommendations

It is recommended that any works of demolition or removal in the main body of the house should be notified to the archaeologist so that the archaeologist can be in attendance during these works to ensure that no inadvertent impact is made on the historic fabric of the building and in order to record any significant details which might come to light during these works.

Sources consulted

This report describes the drawn and photographic record made towards an assessment of the western complex of buildings at Plas Coch. Sources consulted include:

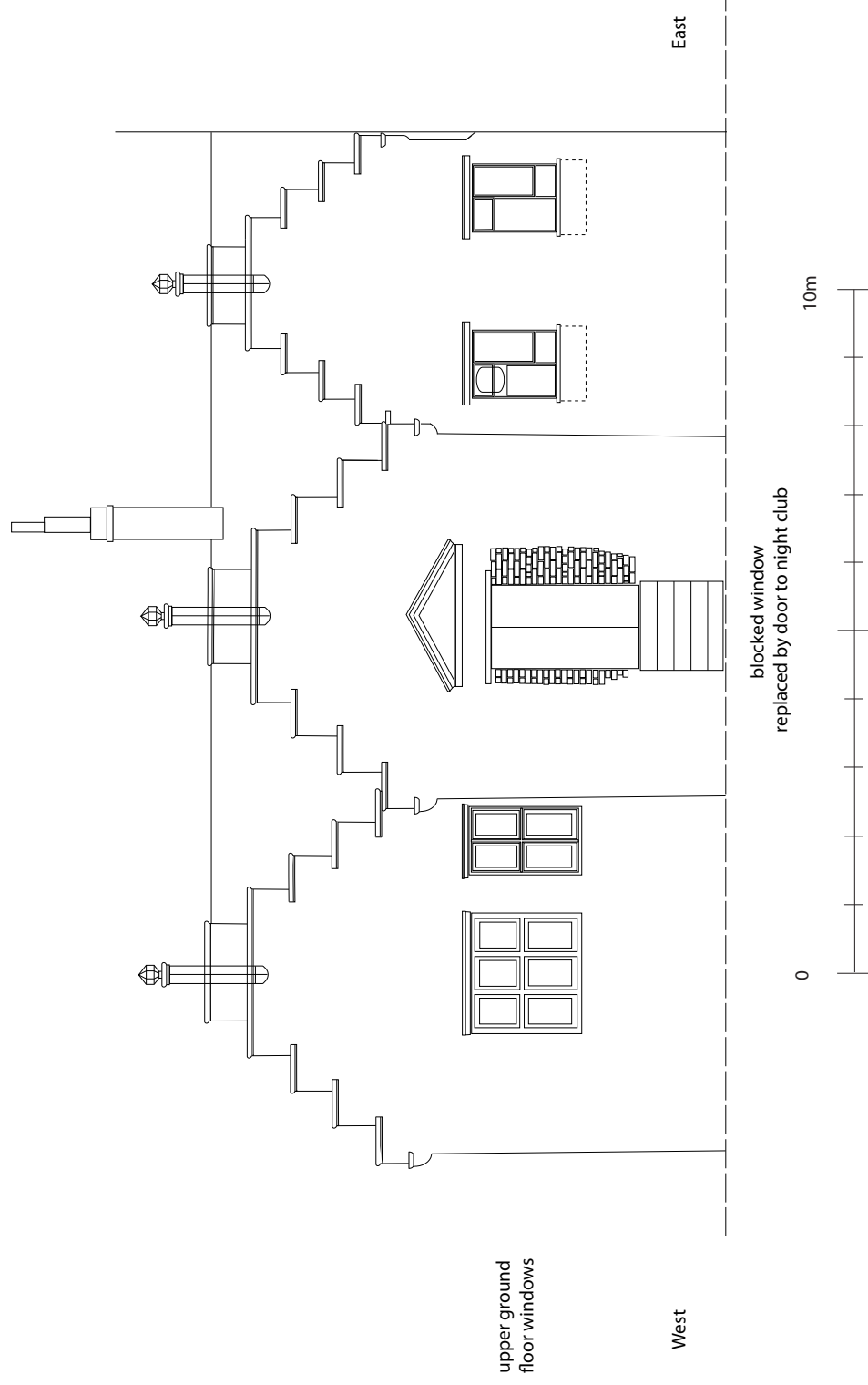
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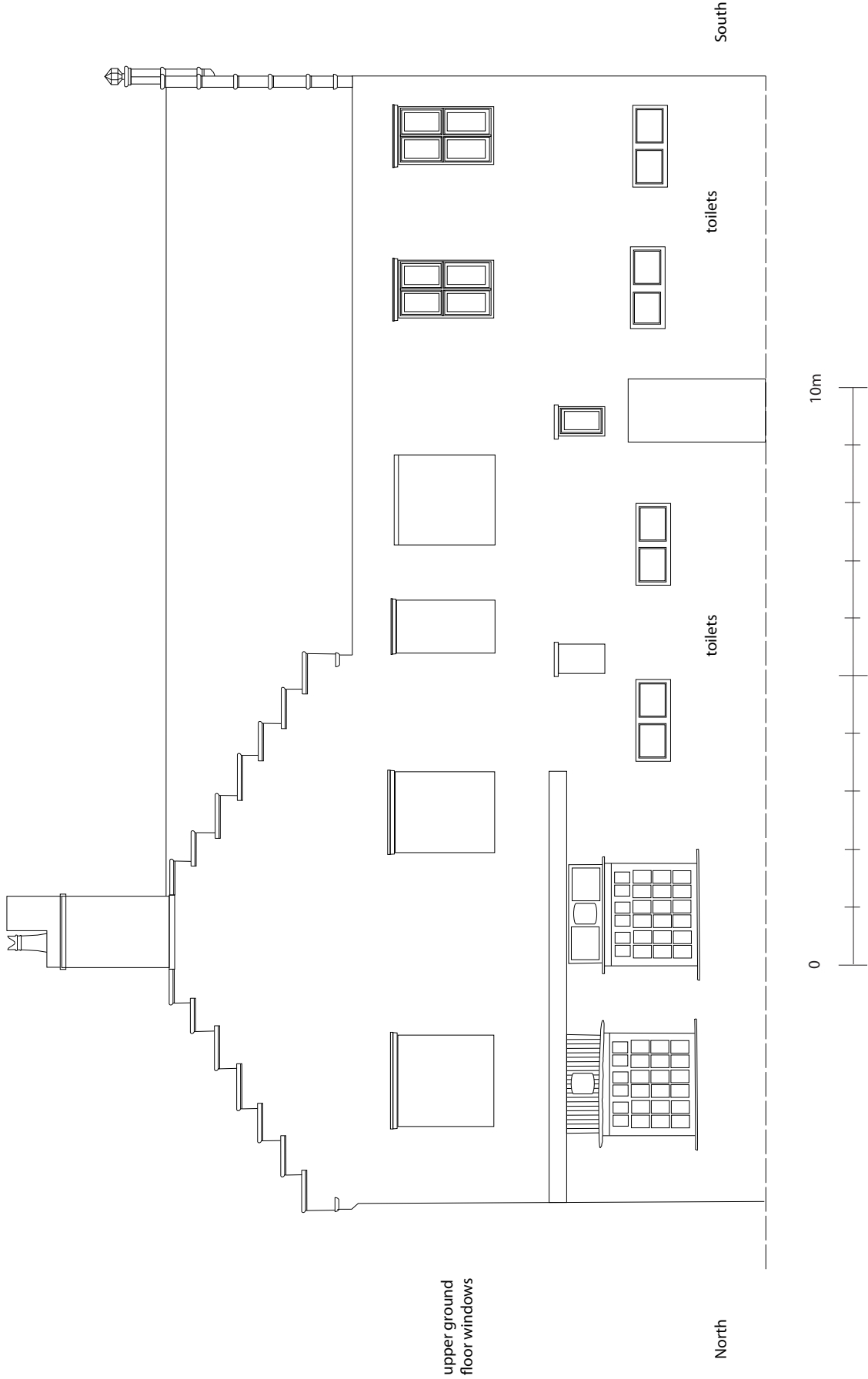
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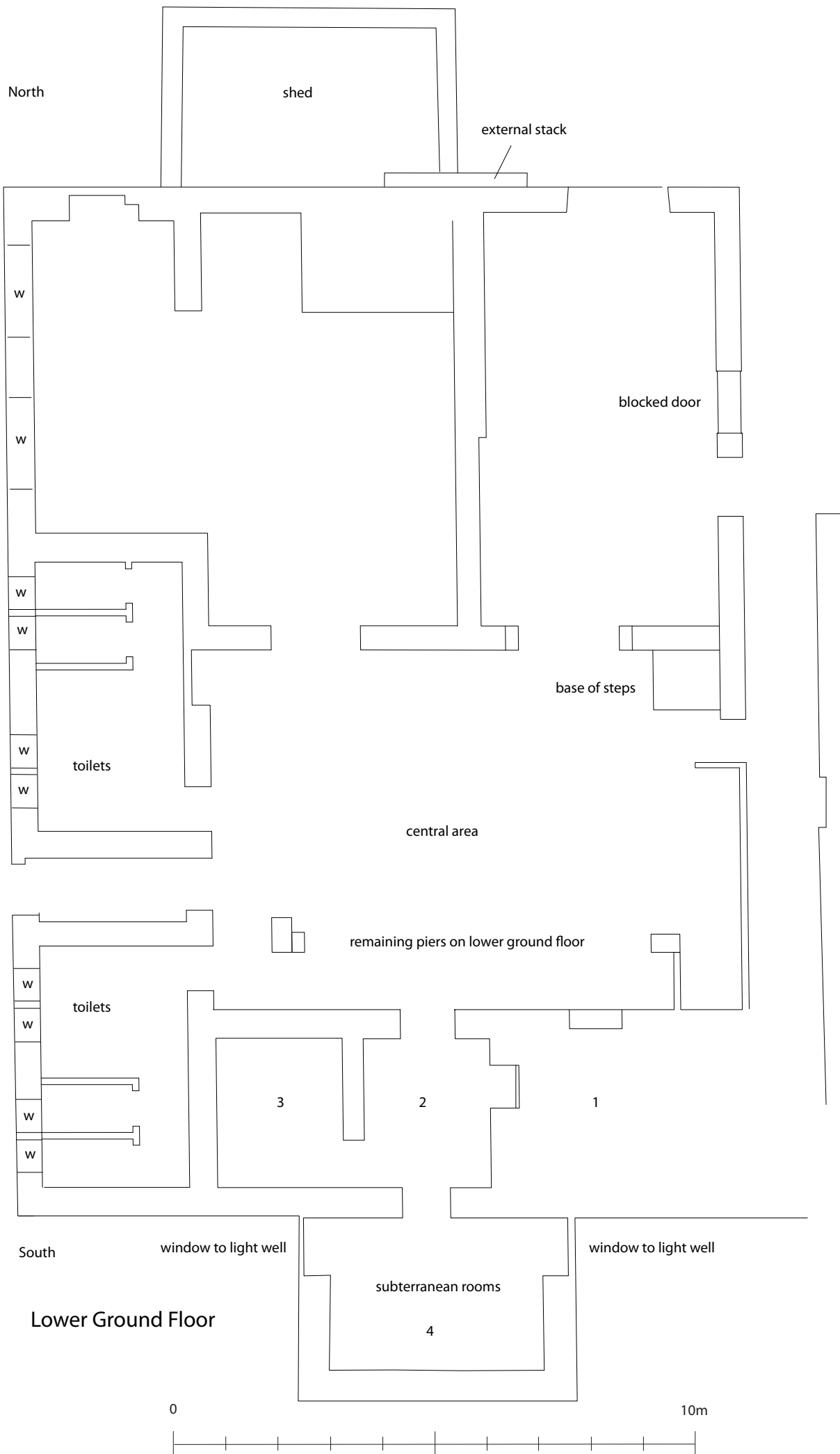
Southern Facade



Western Facade



Northern Facade





The western complex at Plas Coch from the lake

The southern facade of the western buildings





The Upper Ground Floor looking towards the windows which overlook the lake. The former billiard room was against the right hand wall.

The northern facade and entrance to the night club





The Lower Ground Floor looking towards the subterranean room on the south

The first floor above the porch and the stud partition scheduled for demolition





The room above the early Victorian dining room with lath and plaster partition scheduled for removal