Piercefield in 2019


In addition, a copy of a detailed description of the remains of the main features (other than the house, gardens and buildings associated with them) by Ken Murphy, *The Piercefield Walks and Associated Picturesque Landscape Features: An Archaeological Survey*, (Cambria Archaeology, 2005), 56pp. This shows some of the paths other than the main one, most of which are now inaccessible.

The following notes are meant to compliment the above leaflet and report. Clicking on the links will automatically download copies.

The following description includes photographs taken during the visit in May 2019 plus some of the 18th and early 19th descriptions of the features.

For more detail see my web pages which contain over 220 descriptions of Piercefield and Windcliff in chronological order:

- Piercefield pre 1802
- Piercefield 1802-1824
- Piercefield 1825-1900
- Piercefield Introduction which includes descriptions of the House
- Piercefield features which has all known descriptions of the many features of the Piercefield estate.

**John Wesley, the Methodist preacher, made many preaching tours of Wales. He visited Piercefield in 1769:**

*I took a walk through Mr Morris’s woods. There is scarce anything like them in the kingdom. They stand on the top and down the side of a steep mountain, hanging in a semi-circular form over the river. Through these woods abundance of serpentine walks are cut, wherein many seats and alcoves are placed, most of which command a surprising prospect of rocks and fields on the other side of the river.*

Wesley, John, *The Journal*, (1735-1790)

Williams, A.H., *John Wesley in Wales, 1739-1790, Entries from his Journal and Diary relating to Wales*, (Cardiff, 1971), pp. 82-83

**Paths**
Most paths were signposted with the Wye Valley Walk footpath symbols and there were a few other signs and explanatory panels on the route but there were a few places where the footpath divides it was not always clear which route to take. Some of these alternative routes are remains of old paths while others are probably sort-cuts created recently by those who know the estate well.

The path is normally clear, broad and well defined but it is narrow and rugged in places with steep drops to the valley below.

![Path between the Platform and Grotto](image)

Path between the Platform and Grotto

![Path between the Lovers Leap and the Temple Gate](image)

Path between the Lovers Leap and the Temple Gate
Path between the Double View and Druid’s Temple

Path between the Druid’s Temple and Giant’s Cave
The main views
Many of the seats and structures provided for the 18th century visitors are no longer clearly visible and the original views from them, which overlooked the Wye and the Lancau Peninsular are almost completely obscured by vegetation which now forms part of an internationally important woodland. Indeed, the woodland is so dense and the edges of the Wye so steep that it is impossible to see any details of one feature from another.
However, some of the original views are still spectacular, including those from features such as The Acove, the Giant’s Cave, the Lover’s Leap, the Lower Windcliff and the Eagles Nest.
The walk may be started at Chepstow Castle carpark (small charge for all day) from which it is necessary to walk past the castle, up the B4293 towards St Arvans to the Leisure Centre where the footpath is signposted. It leads into woods and passes through a gap in the Piercefield Estate Wall.

(1) The modern gap in the Piercefield estate wall. The path to the left leads to the Leisure Centre, that on the right leads to the Alternate Start (see leaflet).

The path continues to The Alcove

(2) The Alcove with a stone bench. Most of the original structure with its arched opening, has gone.
(3) The Alcove with railings from which a view of the Wye and Chepstow may be seen.

1776

an alcove, where there are seats, from which we behold the River Wye directly under us winding in beautiful meanders with a thick hanging wood leading down to a very perfect view of the magnificent Ruins of the Castle of Chepstow and the Town, the perpendicular Crags on the opposite shore forming a fine Contrast with the verdure which sprouts out of a thousand Crevices in the Sides.


1807

[The Alcove] is a small building, placed upon a point of one of the more noble eminences which overlook the Wye – and presents us with a magnificent display of landscape, which derives a double portion of effect from the suddenness with which it bursts upon the view. – On the right, the steeply sloping bank is covered with a fine wood extending circuitously to the ruins of Chepstow Castle, which with a part of the town is seen to great advantage – On the left a beautiful intermixture of wood and rock of which Lancout Cliffs are most conspicuous, overhands the winding channel of the river, and discloses all the romantic varieties of a mountain Picture.

Payne, H.T., ‘Recollections of a visit to Llanbeder [Llanbedr] in the County of Brecon with remarks on an excursion down the River Wye from Rhos to Chepstow including Abergavenny, Monmouth, Persfield, Raglan etc. by A.M.Cuyler, 1807’ [but written by Payne], NLW add MS 784a, pp. 126-144
The view from the Alcove looking south-east towards Chepstow Castle (on the right). In the distance, the supports for the first Severn Crossing are visible. The bridge was built on the site of the original ferry later known as the Old Passage.

The path continues northwards but the putative platforms noted in the archaeological report of 2005 are not obvious.
The Platform
This is a substantial structure, in good order but now lacks any view.

(5) The platform from the path

(6) The platform from below
1818

You now arrive at the Platform, a dark point of view enclosed with iron railing. Here you have a semi-transparent prospect of the Town and Castle of Chepstow on the right, and of the white cliffs of Llancaut, glistening through the thick wood on the left, in a most beautiful and inexpressible manner.

The path crosses a small stream where the Chinese Bridge might have been and continues northwards to the Grotto, set in a natural slope within an Iron Age fort (one of two in this part of the estate). The banks of the forts are almost invisible amongst the undergrowth.

**The Grotto**

This was a 'cave' lined with alabastrine and quartz stones and pebbles, copper and iron cinders. It had a seat in it from which could be seen distant views of Gloucestershire. It was surrounded by a shrubbery including laurels.

(8) The Grotto from the path

(9) The Grotto. The front part of the structure has collapsed.
1768
You next meet with the grotto, a point of view exquisitely beautiful; it is a small cave in the rock, stuck with stones of various kinds; copper, and iron cinders, &c. You look from the seat in it immediately down a steep slope on to a hollow of wood, bounded in front by the craggy rocks, which seem to part you from the Severn in breaks; with the distant country, spotted with white buildings above all; forming a landscape as truly picturesque as any in the world.


This is one of 25 late 18th – early 19th century descriptions of the Grotto.
Standing stone between the Grotto and Double View.
There are several standing stones marked on old Ordnance Survey maps but they are probably 18th century rather than prehistoric.

(12) Standing stone, just to the right of the centre of the picture, from the west.

The standing stone from the east.
The Double View
Both the Severn and Wye were visible from this structure, hence its name but almost nothing is visible now except nearby trees.

(13) View of the Wye from near the Double View

(14) Dry stone walling which might be the base of a structure from which the Double View could be seen.

A path branches off to the south near here, towards the house, stables and kitchen garden.

1808
In the evening went to the celebrated walks of Piercefield three miles in length; we went only half way to the point which they call the double view. On one side you have a fine prospect of a Bend in the Wye, with a ridge of rocks called the Twelve Apostles. On the other side, the view of Chepstow Town and Castle, with the Wye, and Severn to the sea, and counties of Gloucester and Somerset.

Bant, Millicent, [tour] Essex Record Office D/DFr f4, pp. 13-14
The Druid’s Temple
Early visitors described what might have been a circular arrangement of standing stones in an amphitheatre but none sketched them, nor did they record the number or size of stones. These were erected in the late 1750s as a replica of a prehistoric stone circle.
The location of the supposed Druid’s Temple is now too narrow for any sort of impressive arrangement of stones but the original path might have run above and around the south side of the stones (to the right in the photograph below). Two large blocks of stone and an upright stone were identified by the 2005 survey but nearby there is other large stone on the side of the path.

(15) The Druid’s Temple from the west. There is an upright monolith in the middle of the present path and a large rectangular block on the right.

(16) The Druid’s Temple from the east with the upright stone in the middle of the present path in the centre with the large block beyond it. In the foreground is another large block of stone and a rectangular block sloping down from the side of the path on the right.
The Druid’s Temple
1756
... in one part where there are large stones they are making a small druid temple like Roltrich [Rollight stones? near Long Compton, Oxfordshire].
Pococke, Richard, letter [September 1756]; British Library Add ms. 23000, f. 144

Small ‘cave’ between the Druid's Temple and Giant's Cave.

(17) This ‘cave’ was not mentioned by early tourists. Nearby was the viewpoint known as the Pleasant View.
Part of the path between the Druid’s Temple and Giant’s Cave was cut into the rock and a low drystone retaining wall was built against the upper slope.

(18) The path cut into the bank on the left.

(19) Dry stone revetment to the path.

Just before the Giant’s Cave is a path to the west which leads to the Lover’s Leap and the Temple Doors.
The Giant's Cave

(20) The viewpoint outside the Giant's Cave where cannon were once kept to create an echo in the valley below.

(21) Over the cave was an Herculean figure holding an enormous stone, but by 1805 the arms had been worn away.
(22) The interior of the cave with the north entrance just visible at the rear.

(23) The rear entrance of the cave from the north.

1759
Item XX. The Cave where we dined; the opening before it in form of a Semi-circle, which the prospect from thence resembles, from whence are seen the Rocks, the Wood, the River, with fine lawns.

(24) View of Lancaut Peninsular from the mouth of the Giant’s Cave.

(25) View of Lancaut Peninsular from the mouth of the Giant’s Cave.
The Cold Bath
Close to where a stream crosses the path was a building in which there was a tiled bath and changing room. The building was 12 x 7 yards and was fed by a spring. No visitor recorded using it to bathe in. A pile of rubble, 15 m to the south-east of the bath might have been the dressing room.

(26) The stream which crossed the path

(27) The site of the Cold Bath just to the south of the stream. The building is not visible amongst the vegetation and fallen trees.

1768
in the midst appears a small, but neat building, the bathing-house, which, though none of the best, appears from this enormous height, but as a spot of white, in the midst of the vast range of green: towards the right is seen the winding of the river.
The winding road down to the cold bath, is cool, sequestered, and agreeable. The building itself is excessively neat, and well contrived, and the spring, which supplies it, plentiful and transparent.
Lover’s Leap
This can be visited by taking the left fork just to the south of the Giant’s Cave.

(28) It is impossible to give an impression of the enormous drop beneath the fence.

(30) The view of the Wye looking east from the Lover’s Leap.
(31) Part of the old railings behind the modern ones.

1756
The next [view] is at an iron rail over a perpendicular rock from which one sees below the wood, river etc. The gardener told us Mr Morris was standing on the projecting rock, and that soon after it fell down, on which he had this rail put up.

Pococke, Richard, letter [September 1756]; British Library Add ms. 23000, f. 144

1759
You go on from the octagon over open ground, and soon enter into a little wood, which leads to a seat called the ‘Lover’s Leap’. One’s blood is apt to thrill as you enter it: ‘tis on the top of a vast precipice, which, tho’ woody, does not intercept the eye. The seat itself is very near the brink, the little ground there is slopes toward it, and the little railing there is on the margin is so slight as not to give you an idea of safety. When you look over this weak defence the mind is pleasingly struck and altered by one of the most uncommon objects I ever saw.

Spence, Joseph, Osborne Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale.
The Temple Doors
There was a tall building known as The Temple near the edge of the estate close to St Arvans village. It no longer exists.

(32) Beyond the gate is the busy road from St Arvans to Tintern, built about 1795.

1801
A new lodge of freestone, with an iron gate and palisados, leads from the high road into the park; and the approach to the house is conducted with great taste under the direction of Mr. Meicle.
Coxe, William, An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire, (1801), pp. 392-402

1839
quitting the Piercefield grounds by the St. Arvan's gate, we found our chaise waiting, and journeyed quietly towards the Windcliff.
Twamley, Louisa A. The annual of British Landscape Scenery; An autumn ramble on the Wye, (London: 1839), pp. 40-44
The Windcliff
The Windcliff was not part of the Piercefield estate. It lies to the north of the road between St Arvans and Tintern. Many visitors to Piercefield visited it and in 1828 the Duke of Beaufort built a Cottage Ornee known as Moss Cottage at the base of the Windcliff. The cottage was demolished in the 1950s and no trace of it survives. The Duke also constructed a path from the back of the cottage which included (about) 365 steps to the top, where a double platform, known as the Eagles Nest was created. The views of 9 counties which some early tourists claimed to see is no longer possible because of extensive vegetation.

(33) View from the lower Windcliff

1758
... through the pastures [in front of the house] we had a gradual ascent to the top of an high hill call’d the Windcliff, three hundred yards above the level of the Wye which lies directly under it and this steep and almost perpendicular bank is covered with trees to the edge of the Water.
Barford, M., Rev ‘Description of Chepstow, Abbey Tintern, Piercefield, Monmouth and Ragland from a manuscript written November, 1758 by Rev M Barford, Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge’, Cardiff Central Library, MS 2.727, pp. 12-18

1785
[Note:] Windcliff. A very lofty Promontory, at the upper extremity of Piercefield Walks, commanding one of the most beautiful and extensive inland Prospects in this Island; viz. the Rivers Severn and Wye, the Towns and Castles of Chepstow, Thornbury, and Berkeley, the several counties of Brecon and Glamorgan in Wales; Monmouthshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somersetshire, and Devonshire, in England. [end of note]
Pine, William, Chepstow; or, A new guide to gentlemen and ladies whose curiosity leads them to visit Chepstow: Piercefield-walks, Tintern-abbey, and the beautiful romantic banks of the Wye, from Tintern to Chepstow, by water. A poem, in six cantos. Published for the benefit of the Bristol infirmary. (1786), pp. 31-39
The 365 Steps
From the Moss Cottage to the top of Windcliff there are now two paths, one smooth and an easy climb to the top, the other comprises a steep and rugged ascent via many steps, but they are not all in one continuous run.

(34) Some of what are said to be 365 steps from the Moss Cottage to the top of Windcliff

(35) A view of the Wye with Chepstow and the Severn beyond from part-way up the 365 steps
(36) A cutting for the path through a massive block of rock on the 365 steps ascent.

(37) Modern iron stairs over a cavern on the 365 step ascent. No tourist mentioned stairs of this sort.
Upper Windcliff / Eagles Nest
The Windcliff is the highest point in the vicinity of Piercefield but it is necessary to go down hill a little to what became known as the Eagles Nest to see another view of the Lancaut Peninsular and the Severn beyond. There were originally two viewing platforms here, but only one survives.

(38) The seat and railings of the remaining platform at Eagles Nest.

(39) View from The Eagles Nest showing the Lancaut Peninsular with both Severn Crossing Bridges just visible in the background.
**Piercefield House**
A path from near the Double View leads up to the House, Stables and Kitchen Gardens and continues past the Race Course back to Chepstow.

(40) The façade of Piercefield House with its two later flanking pavilions.

(41) Piercefield House overlooking the former lawns and pasture land.
The stables were very large.

another view of the stables.