

NO GILDING OR GILLOWS – A WEEKEND IN WALES Visit to Conwy Valley 8th & 9th May 1999

After registration, coffee and shortbread in a beautiful stone cottage at Llanrwst, we made our way to Gwydir Castle, advertised as a fine example of a 16th century manor house.

Approached from the car park through an avenue of huge and magnificent Cedar trees which had been planted in the early 17th century, we entered, via a gateway in an outer wall, the courtyard to be met by the screech of peacocks, with many males displaying (presumably a compliment to our ladies?). The courtyard buildings in fact only still survive on one and a half sides, although it was quite clear where the original buildings stood, and the general feel of the place was, to this observer, reminiscent of Cothele, although the general construction was very rugged with some huge pieces of rock incorporated in the immensely thick walls.

It was clear that many alterations had been made over the years with doorways blocked up, a stair outshot added, etc. and, unhappily, two 'modern' windows punched through, and this was confirmed by our host Peter Welford, who with his wife Judy, whilst occupying Gwydir as their private residence, are now restoring and researching the house, chiefly under their own steam and at their own expense: a magnificent effort that deserves applause and encouragement and is now being supported by CADW.

Certainly Peter's research is already detailed and he entertained us to a fairly complete history. The estate was acquired by Meredith ap Ieuan ap Robert, the founder of the Wynn dynasty, and it was he who built the original Castle, which for much of the 16th and 17th centuries dominated North Wales, and developed into an immensely wealthy estate. Alterations and additions were made to the original buildings in c.1540, c.1600 and c.1828 (probably by Sir Charles Barry). After falling into disuse and then tenanted to farmers it was purchased by Earl Carrington in 1895 and occupied until 1921, during which time many dignitaries were entertained. Then everything was sold up, including many items closely related to the Wynns. In following years, many fires broke out, gutting the solar tower and leaving it roofless, making the place untenable and it was abandoned.

In 1944 a retired bank manager, Mr. Arthur Clegg bought the ruin and, with his family began a twenty year project of restoration (or should it be 'rescueation?'). There can be little doubt that much inappropriate work was carried out, but leave that to one side - Mr. Clegg rescued Gwydir until the safe hands of the Welfords arrived.

Now, structural problems are being addressed and original arrangements restored, but perhaps the most significant restoration to date has been the dining room, the panelling, doorcase and fireplace of which passed in the 1921 sale to William Randolph Hearst, who did nothing with it, finally selling it to the New York Metropolitan Museum in 1956, who promptly put it into storage. Tracked down by Peter Welford, lengthy negotiations followed, but all was finally restored to Gwydir and after puzzling all the pieces out, this incredible room was finally opened in 1998. Attributed to Inigo Jones, this amazing room is a fine example of its period, and includes a twelve foot baroque doorcase with twin Bernini

inspired columns, with a polychromed, gilded and embossed leatherwork frieze.

Other rooms in the house include a lower hall, originally a great hall with a central hearth but later divided to create an upper hall with services under, and from which a stone spiral stair in an outshot rises to the upper floor, from which the ornately carved roof can be seen. The solar hall has the great chamber above, and to one side is a 'hall of justice'.

H.G. Mitchell

After a hearty lunch we walked in sunshine to the parish church of Llanrwst. Inside, Richard Bebb explained the significance of its superb late 15th century rood screen with its magnificent intricate carving.

The adjoining Gwydir Chapel, built by Sir Richard Wynn in 1637, was equally inspiring. Its treasures include fascinating styles of carved woodwork contained in the structure of its stalls, desk and table. The egg and reel turned stall ballusters and naive caryatids seemed stylistically right for 1637, but the pierced panels and reeded decoration of the table legs and stall posts were more Elizabethan in conception. The mysterious eleven carved heads, integral with the stall posts, each with shaved back hairline and narrow set eyes, evoked comparison with Celtic, medieval and even oriental peoples. Trying to date and interpret these naive figureheads and their setting transported us briefly back through time and into one of the many mysteries of Wales.

An exhilarating walk up the hillside in the rain brought us to Ty'n y Coed, a remarkable time warp of an earlier way of life. The present tenant explained to us that her predecessor, the last of six generations to have owned and farmed the property, retired in 1990 due to ill health, having resisted all efforts to introduce electricity and running water to the house.

The original single-storey farmhouse was rebuilt in the 1860s to give higher ceilings and two first floor bedrooms. The kitchen, the only ground floor room apart from a dairy, was typically crammed with local furniture and fittings: a small table and chairs in, the window, two longcase clocks, one to the left of the fire, the other to the left of the cupboard base dresser, two joined open-sided armchairs in front of the fire (windsor chairs were not common in this locality), a cricket table and a glazed storage cupboard.

The National Trust has carried out a sympathetic 'as found', conservation programme with most of the furniture reinstated to provide an authentic 19th century interior, (including smells!).

The isolated stone farmstead of Ty Mawr Wybrnant stands in a dramatic setting by a cascading stream. It is a 17th century re-build of the medieval cruck-framed, single-storey dwelling in which Bishop William Morgan was born. A cross passage, formed by two oak post and panel partitions, separates the service room and parlour from the hall. A chimney stack at both ends of the house gave it minor gentry status in the mid 17th century for this remote area.

A varied collection of North Wales furniture, includes a small tridarn inscribed and dated 1689, which has been adjudged to have an associated canopy. However, the canopy column supports and the split balusters on the centre stage

have identical tiny carved dogstooth decoration, suggesting that, at the very least, they came from the same workshop.

The custodian, in a wonderfully rich local accent, narrated a long-standing local belief that each of the three tridarn stages was acquired separately by a couple on the occasion of their betrothal, marriage and first-born child. A rare example of an 18th century panelled oak box bed from Meirionnydd stands in the chamber, and together with chairs, stools, tables and cupboards provided an interesting high status study collection.

In the early evening Rick Turner of CADW gave us an expert interpretation of the free-standing Gwydir Uchaf chapel. Built in 1673, adjacent to the Wynn's second house of 1604, it is set on the hillside above their first home; Gwydir Castle.

Notable external features are the original iron-studded oak door with decorated strap hinges, and the wooden windows which initially had been plastered to imitate stone. The spectacular interior has a striking baroque-inspired painted ceiling of canted section. It displays robust angels on cushioned clouds, naively painted in a glue tempera on wooden boards by local artists. The gallery, staircase and altar rails still boast their original turned balusters, thus providing useful reference dating material. The low panelled dado with fixed benches below the gallery is of poplar, whilst the 8ft high panelling with applied mouldings is of spruce. This has finely carved limewood cherubs adorning its corners. The 17th century carved oak figures attached to the pulpit have a more robust and regional character to them.

This charming small church, now maintained by CADW, is an important survivor of the 19th century rebuilding campaign.

Ian Phillips

Sunday started with an illustrated lecture by Rick Turner on the history of Plasnewydd, and its restoration. Robert Wynn (b. 1520) was the third son of John Wynn of Gwydir. A large part of his life was spent in service to Philip Hoby, much of it travelling in Europe, soldiering under Henry VIII, and as an ambassador for both Edward and Mary. On returning to Wales, he made his home in Conwy, and built Plasnewydd (the Great Hall) between 1576 and 1585. It became the most prominent house in the town, incorporating classical styles he would have seen in Europe alongside local traditions. The pedimented windows and crow stepped gables would be at home in Bruges, whilst other aspects, like the roof trusses over the Great Chamber, bear a strong resemblance to his father's house at Gwydir.

Plasnewydd has survived over 400 years with most of its fixed woodwork, plasterwork ceilings and even some furniture intact. This has helped the restoration recently undertaken by CADW (Welsh Historic Monuments) bring the house back to life, using an inventory of 1665 as a focal point.

The furniture has come from a number of sources. The house contained two collections (some from the Mostyn collection including pieces thought to be part of the 1665 inventory), period pieces have been loaned from St. Fagans, brought in or gifted. These have often been carefully selected for local provenance or regional characteristics. The gaps have been filled by considered replication - using the inventory as a guide.

The Hall and Great Chamber still contain fixed benching; their general form suggest an early 17th century dateline.

Dendrodating, however, has made them contemporary to the house. The Great Hall also houses a long plank top table on six turned legs (unusual in that the legs splay out to the side, like a joint stool: this is thought to be the table mentioned in 1665), and a contemporary highchair loaned from St Fagans. These stand with replica back stools, joint stools, lipwork chairs and a faithful copy of the Wynn Cupboard. The original of this, which would have stood at Gwydir, was previously on loan from the Burrell Collection.

The Great Chamber, perhaps the most striking room, houses two tables from the Mostyn Collection with mitred frame tops, a period armchair and settle upholstered in leather, alongside replica joint stools and an interesting wicker fire screen on an oak stand. All this is set against a backdrop of specially commissioned Dornix hangings and the striking painted plasterwork walls and ceiling. This blend continues through the house in a number of other rooms, including bedrooms, kitchen, pantry and servants rooms, all with unrestricted access. The contents are far too numerous to mention here, all chosen with the same consideration.

Plasnewydd is a remarkable survival of a fine Tudor town house. The decision to repaint the embellished plasterwork, the specifically woven hangings and the profusion of everyday articles has helped resurrect the house. Its new life was all the more apparent after visiting the more skeletal Gwydir Castle, but how reassuring it was to see the fine efforts being made to revitalise Plasnewydd House.

Chris Currie

Our final afternoon began at the National Trust's Aberconwy House, the last remaining mediaeval merchants house in Conwy. Dating from the 14th century, it is now furnished with pieces dating mainly from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, many on loan from the Museum of Welsh Life, St Fagans. The most impressive of these was a fine Llanrwst dresser with numerous refinements including the characteristic 'belly' rack with the unusual addition of a central clock, its scroll pediment applied with a delicately carved neo-classical urn above an arched painted dial signed Mos(es) Evans, Llangerniew, and dated 1797. The breakfront base featured the conventional arrangement of drawers and cupboards but with square section reeded pilasters and ogee bracket feet.

Another typical example of locally produced furniture was a tridarn inlaid with the date 1698 to the twin arched central panel. Unusually for an example of this early date was the inclusion of drawers to the base. Other notable pieces included a late 17th century oak bread cage from Llainfadyn, two arks, one with fielded panels, a painted dial longcase Clock by Watkin Owen, Llanrwst, and a curved high back pine Settle bearing a plaque inscribed 'Old Settle from the hotel kitchen Ponterwyd, mentioned by George Borrow in Wild Wales'.

The only Trust piece, a local hanging Press with two arched fielded-panel doors, three horizontal panels and

two panelled drawers drew attention for its excellent condition and well finished internal door hinges and hanging pegs, probably of yew wood.

Our final destination, a short walk away, was St Mary's Church. Dating from the late 13th century and partly built on the site of a Cistercian Abbey, it was extensively restored by Sir Gilbert Scott in the mid 19th century. It contains one of the most notable late 15th century rood screens in Wales. Divided into five bays and decorated with local heraldic devices, its intricately carved fan vaulting is unlike anything else found in Wales. It was probably the gift of Sir Richard Pole, governor of Conwy Castle from 1488-1509 and friend of Prince Arthur, eldest son of Henry VII.

The Church contains a wealth of decorative elements including Wynn family tombs, memorials, and a 17th century ironbound chest, along with floor tiles relating to the monastic occupation of the Abbey. It was suggested by one of our members that impressive pinnacle pew ends and fragmentary panels may have been part of a screen and related woodwork, predating the present screen.

Our grateful thanks go to Richard Bebb and Peter Collins for organising this most excellent and enjoyable weekend.

Philip Havard