WALES'S UNIVERSAL ARCHITECT

SIR CLOUGH WILLIAMS-ELLIS (1883–1978)

By RICHARD HASLAM

THE fame of one of an artist's works can easily obscure the rest, so that only a partial picture emerges, which it is then all the harder to complete. This has happened with Portmeirion and Clough Williams-Ellis, the centenary of whose birth has just passed. The success of his "new model resort", begun in 1925 and described in COUNTRY LIFE in 1930 and 1976, has undoubtedly led people to mistake what was perhaps more like a hobby for his real career.

In order to redress the balance, a small exhibition of his other activities was set up in the village at Portmeirion in 1981. While attention is concentrated there again with the opening of a celebratory garden shelter designed by his daughter Susan Williams-Ellis, dizzily perched above the site on the 12th-century castle rock, this article looks at the astonishing range of his interests, and attempts to set them in an historical context.

A practising architect for 75 years, Clough (as he was unmistakably known) formed his plurality of styles early, before motorcars and steel-framed buildings assaulted the sense of human scale. His convictions did not alter, and he therefore provided a direct link with the Arts-and-Crafts ideals of around 1900, reaching a nadir of disapproval by the 1960s but living long enough to see his values again more widely shared. This exceptionally long career coincided with upheavals of wars, ideologies and lifestyles, but he kept abreast of the major issues of his century, making original contributions in many fields.

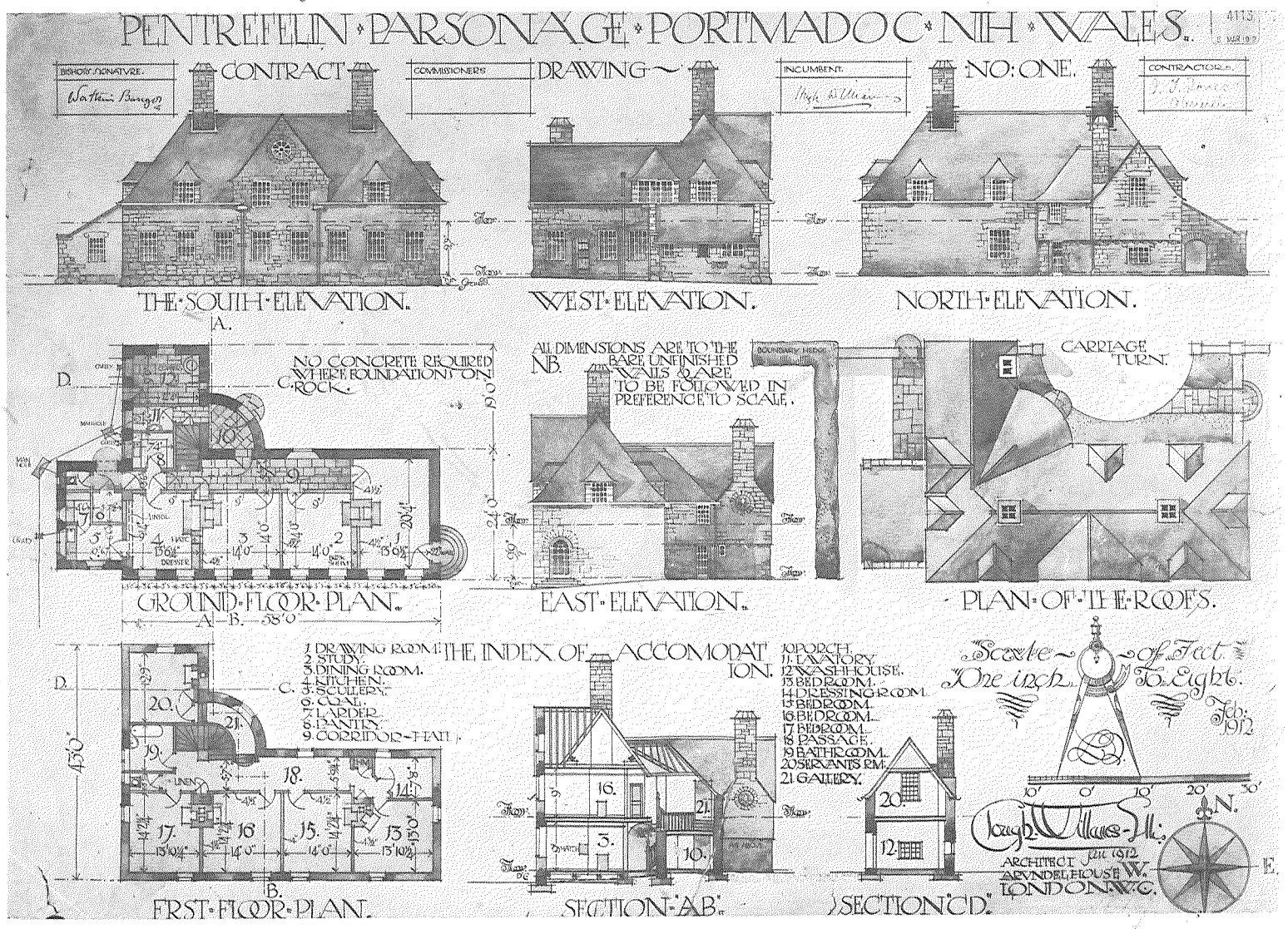
It is fascinating to see how broadly he interpreted the role of an architect. A gifted

1—SIR CLOUGH WILLIAMS-ELLIS AT THE RIBA IN 1934. He was well known for public speeches on architectural and environmental issues

designer, he tried his hand at layouts of new houses, schools and churches, gardens and gateways, country houses, furniture, lettering, monuments and so on. Then there were his historical interests, which led to several books, such as *The Pleasures of Architecture* (1924 and 1954), written with his wife, encouraging a wider enjoyment of architecture of all periods, including his own. His rural background gave him his concern for the countryside and his part in the founding of the Councils for the Protection of Rural England and of Rural Wales.

The most evident and long-lasting effects of what was almost a second but parallel profession lie in what we now call the environment; he called it "amenity". Neither is a happy term, but in giving voice in the 1920s to the growing consciousness of the harmful effects of a developed industrial economy, in campaigning for legislation and an outlook of planning ahead, and embodying an alternative vision in the Morris tradition in all that he did, he could be claimed as the first environmentalist in the modern sense. In a way his concentration on an ecological philosophy took the place, in the 1930s and 1940s, of adherence to the purist architectural movement of those years.

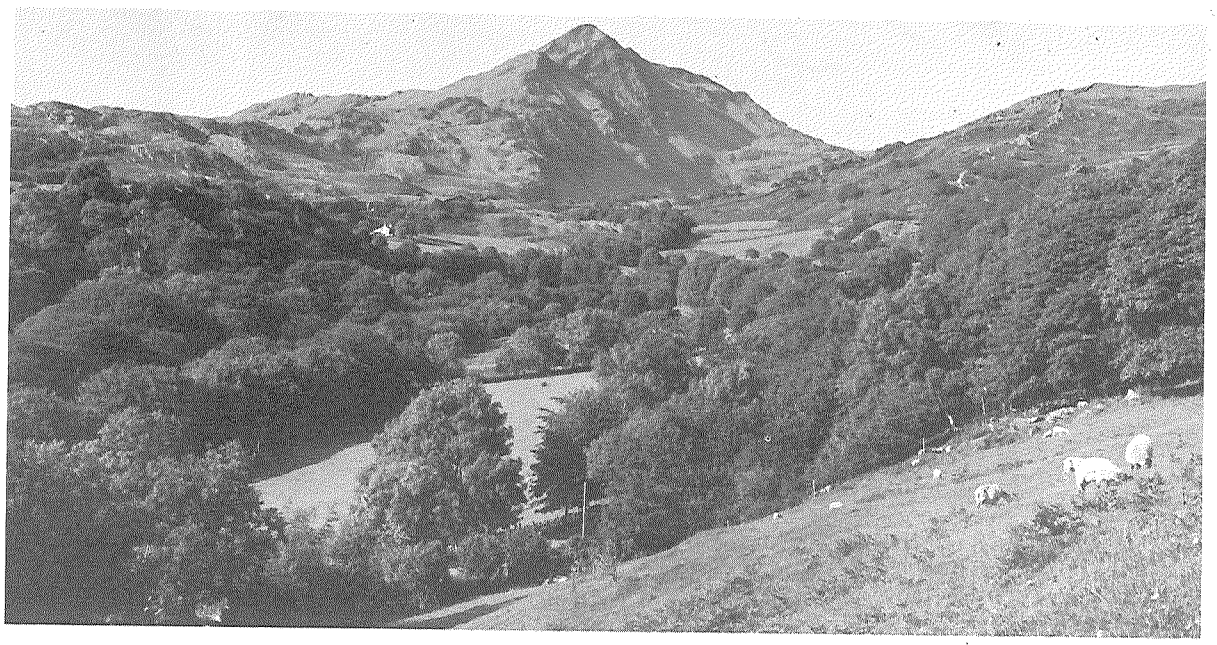
Just as Portmeirion, for all its controversial standing in the architectural profession, has always had a uniquely large public for a 20th-century work, so as a public figure he had the common touch. A skilful propagandist in the press, and as a result comically wary of libel, he took his ideas round the world. His quip in Sydney ("By God what a site; by man what a mess") sums up the enlightened attitude he hoped to create, not only in Australasia, but in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, where he loved to sail. A National Trust for Greece to protect its coast from development was one unfulfilled ambition. Today, he is perhaps most admired in the United States.



2—A SHEET WITH NINE DRAWINGS FOR PENTREFELIN PARSONAGE, PORTHMADOG, 1912. A lucid exposition in ink and watercolour of a house in the tradition of Webb and Voysey

This general impulse found its particular application in this country in various ways. Following his angry and seminal book, *England and the Octopus* (1928), he became president of the Design and Industry Association, and steered it to analyse the disfigurement of the towns and the countryside, themes that are depressingly still alive. Publication of *Cautionary Guides* followed, to St Albans (Fig 7), Carlisle, and Oxford. They state premises, such as that a planned landscape is to be preferred to ribbon development, which today may need restating in terms of the industrial and warehouse building now making nonsense of our green-field motorways.

His abhorrence of slum towns and search for alternatives led him to serve (if less happily) on the Government Committee on Art and Industry, the Glass Industry Working Party and as chairman of the first post-war New Town, Stevenage. He did not last there, however, being incurably impatient of regulations. It is an irony, then, that he should have played such an important part in the evolution of all Town and Country Planning legislation from 1947 to 1972, and that one of his closest friends should have been Professor Patrick Abercrombie. The needs to control development, to set sensible standards (the 7ft 6in ceiling after the war was his suggestion) and to list old buildings for preservation were self-evident to him; but the way the administrative machinery operated in practice disappointed him.



3—THE MAESGWM VALLEY, NEAR CROESOR, SNOWDONIA, WITH CNICHT BEYOND. A landscape bought for preservation in the 1930s

4—PART OF CLOUGH'S GARDEN AT HIS HOME, PLAS BRONDANW, PENRHYNDEUDRAETH. A hillside formalised into long terraces and axial rooms

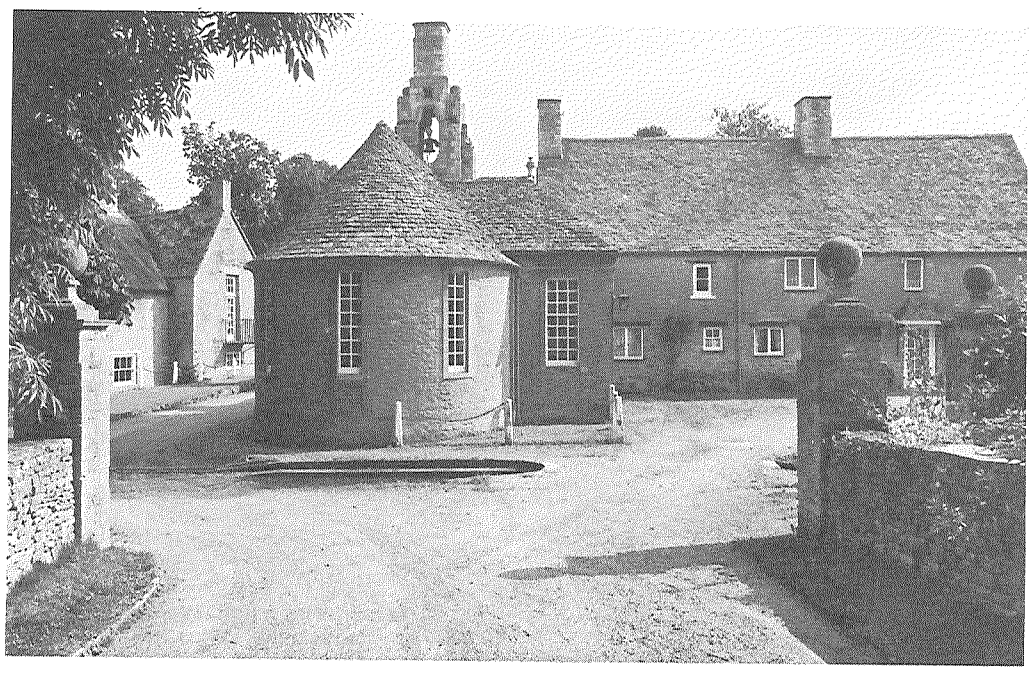
There is no doubt that he was deeply influenced by his native landscape in North Wales. Its sweetness, its demonstration of the the laws of nature and of his predecessors who lived in it, were the unspoken accompaniment to his work.

His father had handed over the "wildly romantic little estate" of his Williams ancestors to his second son in 1908. The additions he made to it over the next 70 years, particularly in the garden which is arguably his best work (Fig 4), are as remarkable as a Whig landowner's, on their miniature scale and in their rocky context.

In 1932, he bought for preservation the estate that covered the upper part of the valley and the mountains (Fig 3), and a similar motive led him to acquire equally striking landscapes in Nantgwynant and elsewhere—at a time when a 10gn fee earned in London paid for many acres of hill land—and give part to the National Trust and part as green belt to Portmeirion. A right of public access concerned him. He was a protagonist for the holiday camp near Pwllheli, and on the wider issue, a leading figure in the pre-war movement that culminated in the National Parks Act in 1947.

As a member both of the National Trust's Committee for Wales and of the National Parks Committee, and an early supporter of the Trust's architectural work (after the Second World War he published two volumes of *On Trust for the Nation*), he came to an understanding of the interrelation of intelligent design, historical context, and the natural element in landscape. In this field, perhaps the crown of his career was to urge, with David Bowes-Lyon, the establishment of the Trunk Road Advisory Committee in the Ministry of Transport; and then to sit on it, or rather in a helicopter, planning routes for motorways—an echo of his pioneer aerial reconnaissance sorties in the First World War.

It may come as a surprise to find a brain of such versatility occupied mostly, as an architect, with small buildings. The explanation



5—CENTRE OF THE VILLAGE, CORNWELL, OXFORDSHIRE. A Cotswold village overhauled in the 1930s, modernised with a shop and hall and given a delicate water-splash and conduit

lies partly in his temperament and partly in the kind of commissions that came his way. As a very young man he was already putting up workaday buildings—farm cottages, a laundry, sheltered housing—and therefore curtailed his training at the Architectural Association after only one term. He ran an office in London for almost 10 years before the First World War, and hoped for opportunities with larger country houses, like Lutyens, the only living architect he wholeheartedly admired.

Llangoed Castle in Breconshire (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1913) remained almost the only such project on an extensive scale until the comparable remodelling of Nantclwyd Hall in the 1960s. He overhauled and made additions to a number of manor houses, such as Bolesworth Castle, Moynes Park and Great Hundridge Manor, between the wars. After the Second World War the pattern went into reverse, with the replacement of large houses by more manageable ones, as at Rhiwlas and Voelas in North Wales and Dalton Hall in Cumbria.

These give far from a full picture of his achievement in architecture, however. Only in 1976 he reflected that what interested him most was group building. Several opportunities of this kind came to him, besides Portmeirion; at Cornwell (Fig 5) and Oare, in southern England; at Cushendun, in Northern Ireland; and at Llanystumdwy, in Wales. It was a matter of social relationships, the variety of building types, of his liking for the small scale, combined with the intensely romantic view of English architecture in the just earlier work of Baillie-Scott.

6—THE CHAPEL, BISHOP'S STORTFORD COLLEGE, HERTFORDSHIRE (1921). The first building by a living architect to be listed (in 1962), its interior was altered in 1967

In the larger houses, at Oare, Shanghai and in London, he employed a fashionable free Classicism based on proportions more attenuated than Stuart's, which later divided into a Wren-like manner and a Nordic mode derived from Tengbom and others he admired in Scandinavia. For cottages he was equally eclectic, his free vernacular being subtly scaled and often more sophisticated than its prototypes.

His concentration on small houses and cottages is a constant theme. Against a traditional rural background he produced a great variety of farmworkers' houses and later some council houses. For much of his life, materials were in short supply and he tried to gain acceptance for well-tested alternatives, like cob and *pisé-de-terre*. His treatise on their making appeared after his return from the First World War, as a contribution to the provision of low-cost and quickly built houses for returning soldiers.

He had married during that war, and already had this interest in common with his father-in-law, St Loe Strachey, the editor of *The Spectator*, who had run a competition for 100gn houses which Clough entered, as he did the earlier COUNTRY LIFE one at Gidea Park in Essex. This was also a subject covered in COUNTRY LIFE, before and after the First World War, especially by Laurence Weaver, whose memoir he wrote in 1933.

Such schemes poured from his London office until the Second World War, alongside much larger commissions—to rescue Stowe and turn it into a school, to design for the "British Empire Exhibition" at Wembley in 1924, to convert Ashridge to serve as Bonar Law College in 1929. Much of his work has been destroyed—by bombs, developers, fire and later architects—and his theatrically Baroque interiors have been especially vulnerable.

This is a great pity from the point of view of his colour. The lightheartedness that colour, whether painted on or integral, as well as carved decoration, gives to buildings drew him variously to East Anglia, New England, Austria and the theatre. One of the best examples, with its masterly ochre brickwork and pointing, white stones and red pantiles, is the chapel at Bishop's Stortford College (Fig 6).

Colour is also an integral part of Clough Williams-Ellis's drawings (Fig 2). Finely lettered, first in an Arts-and-Crafts idiom but later in a robust Roman hand, they convey with great clarity the idea within the design. Quite as much as the built work, they raise the question of his place among 20th-century designers. Their qualities of taut line, two-dimensionality and hand craftsmanship are unmistakable. In their absence of fuss they have a modern feel, yet the forms are rooted in history. If the zenith of his architectural career came in the 1920s, when the ways divided in the 1930s he took the "traditional" rather than the "modern" path.

In the long run, Clough's position was unique to himself, in that he embodied new functions in an inherited formal language. Though attracted by its elegance, the austerity of 1930s modernism disconcerted him; he was of course half a generation older than the members of the MARS group. *Architecture Here and Now* (1930), a look at the Modern Movement of the Continent compiled with John Summerson, is evidence of an open mind; but serious expression baffled him as much as overwhelming scale was to do, decades after.

He ventured into flat roofs for the modern building types, especially restaurants; but excuse was also found for curved elements, as at the wood-built and now destroyed Laughing Water restaurant on a lake near Cobham, in Kent. On the whole, he found that style a limitation, so when he designed the first purpose-built youth hostel, complete with an adjustable partition in the passage to separate the sexes according to the ratio that evening, it had a little wooden pediment like a pavilion.

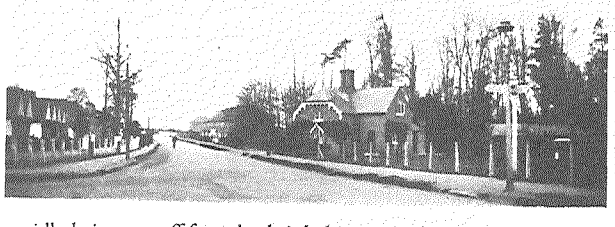
While the war brought his London practice at Romney's House to a 10-year close, he remained in the mainstream in welcoming the gaiety of the Festival of Britain. After it, he embarked on a second expansion at Portmeirion, including the removal there of several works by architectural predecessors from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

Clough had the ability to charm. Another of his gifts was to be able to speak in public, wittily, penetratingly, and in words that derived their richness perhaps from the clerical background of his family. He could still do it in his 90s. The influence of so rounded and experienced a man in calling for the protection of beauty in all its forms, and for a greater sense of responsibility, both among the authorities and in individuals, is incalculable. Much that we now take for granted is owed to him.

Illustrations: 2 and 7, British Architectural Library/RIBA; 3–6, the author.

A Green and Pleasant Land

The country round as it was—



rapidly being cut off from both inhabitants and visitors by "ribbon" development along the main roads (see page 31)

7—A PAGE FROM THE *CAUTIONARY GUIDE TO ST ALBANS* (1929). Photography and succinct captions at the birth of "outrage" journalism