

The simple seventeenth century home of Welsh squires in Snowdonia, rehabilitated by their descendant.

ANYTHING in the nature of a gentleman's "place" in the English sense of the word is not often met with in its original form among the mountains of Wales, least of all in the fastness of Merioneth. Territorial magnates were always few and their simple needs satisfied by houses only somewhat larger than the rude stone and heavy slated hovels of their tenantry. Until the close of the sixteenth century these gentry were as innocent of architectural notions as of surnames. Thenceforward, as one found his way to Court, another to the Bench, and a third married an English heiress, thick-walled and low-roomed mansions began to rise in the less sterile valleys, rustic adaptations of the current English type of manor house. One of the best preserved is the Wynnes' house at Glyn, near Harlech; Plâs Mawr in Conway is another; Mostyn, Bodysgallen ("Bosgethlyn"), and Edwinstford more civilised manor houses in the valleys lying towards England. But few ancient Welsh homes survive, many having been replaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries with more commodious mansions, others suffered to lapse into the hands of a penurious peasantry.

This was the condition of Plâs Brondanw—which, it is perhaps necessary to say, is pronounced "Brondânno" when—the late Mr. Williams-Ellis of Glasfryn made over the house to his second son, Mr. Clough Williams-Ellis, now the well known architect, but in 1912 an inexperienced yet enthusiastic novice.

In his quasi-autobiography *The Architect*, Mr. Williams-Ellis has described vividly, if apologetically, how the gift stirred him to the depths:

At that period I fully shared my mother's piously dynastic views and regarded all things ancestral with a reverence almost superstitious if not indeed religious.

Also I was in the antiquarian phase, and the guardianship of a rambling old Carolean "Capital Mansion House" set in a wildly romantic little estate amongst the Welsh mountains that had been held by my family for over four centuries was well calculated to inflame me.



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1.—THE GATE-HOUSE ON THE HIGHWAY (1914).

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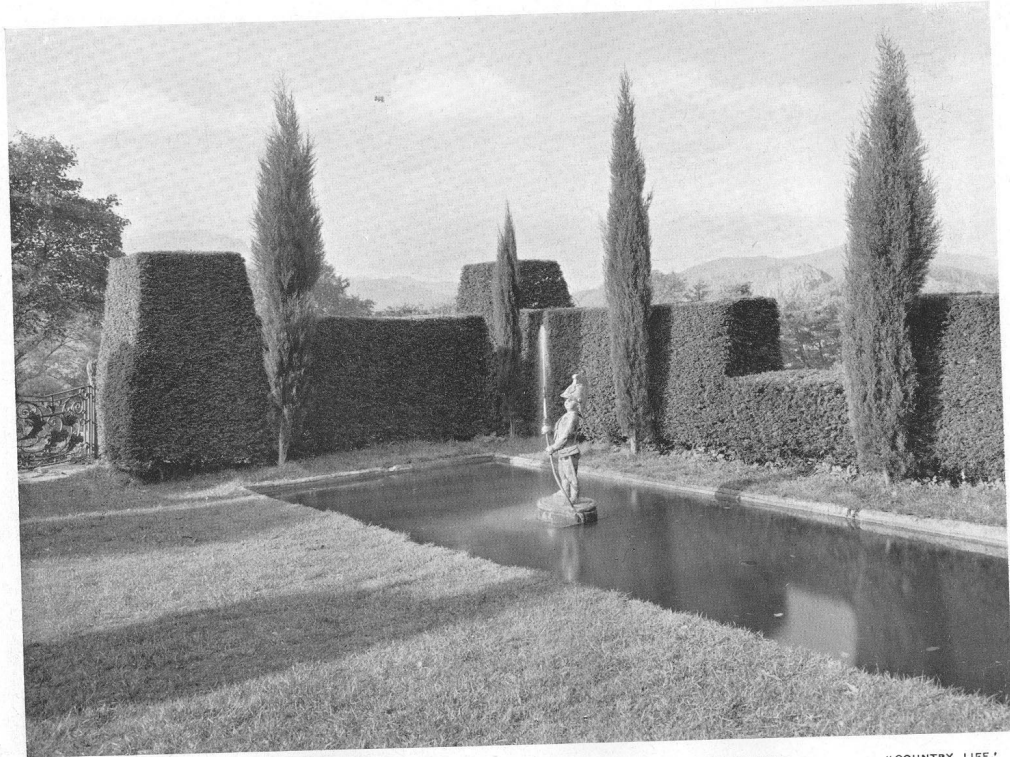


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2.—"THE WILD AND STORMY OUTLINE OF THE SNOWDONIAN CHAIN." "COUNTRY LIFE."
Overlooking the garden and the drained Traeth Mawr, from the forecourt.



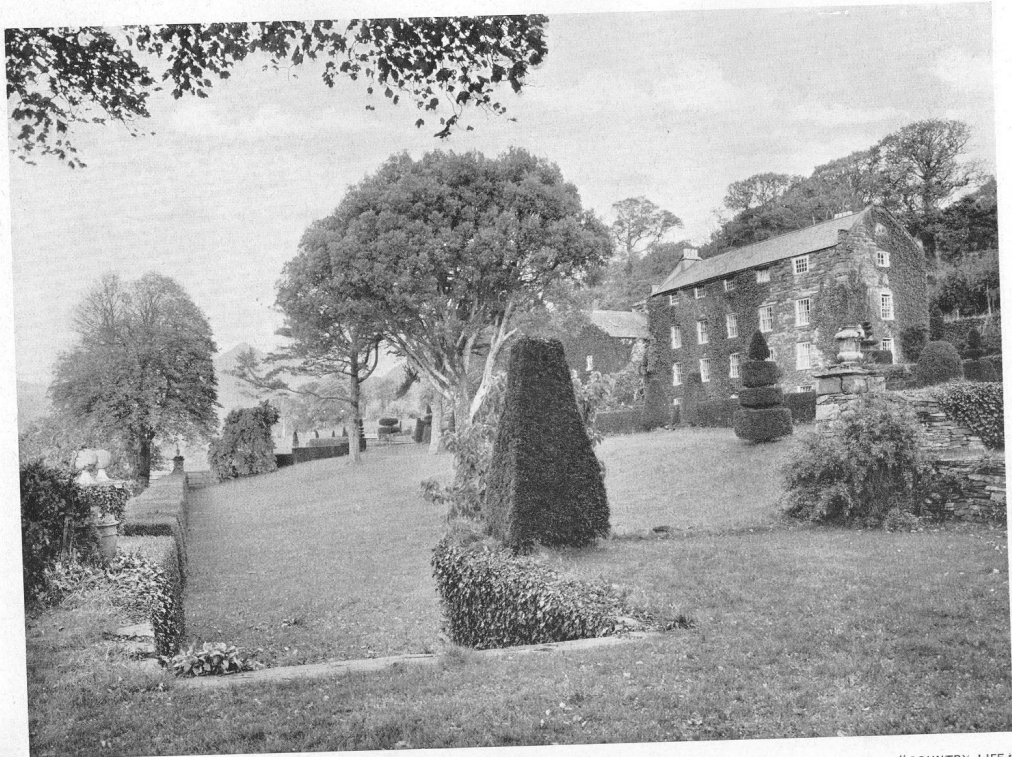
3.—THE SLATE-SLABBED TERRACE BELOW THE FORECOURT, AND THE CHARLES II WING.



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4.—THE FIREMAN FOUNTAIN. A GARDEN COMPARTMENT.

"COUNTRY LIFE."



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5.—FORECOURT AND ENTRANCE DOOR.

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And well it might. Though the house had long been abandoned by the family and was then divided up into seven tenements, it had never been "deflowered by restoration," and, set in a miniature park, it looks across the broad valley of the former Traeth Mawr at the sublime immensities of the Snowdon massif.

The records of the Williamses of Brandonw are notably incomplete, and, though the property seems to have been in the same family from, at any rate, the end of the fifteenth century, little is known of anyone before Robert ap Roland ap John ap Howel, who married Gwen, daughter of William ap Richard of Gornwyn Uchaf, in 1626. It was his nephew, William Robert, married to Sydney de Madryn, who in 1660 added the new front (Fig. 3) to the old house. Now that surnames were becoming stabilised, William's son William took one of his father's names as his surname (as the custom was), thus becoming William Williams.

An enterprising owner of Brandonw was another William Williams, who was a contemporary of Mr. Maddox of Tan-yr-Allt and Tremadoc across the valley—or estuary, as it then was. It was from William Williams that Mr. Maddox, aided by Thomas Ellis, who inherited Brandonw, and by the poet Shelley, though bitterly opposed by Shelley's friend T. L. Peacock, originally got ideas for his grandiose scheme for the Portmadoc Embankment, which turned what must have been one of the loveliest estuaries in the world into a far less romantic plain of a very valuable farming land.

The sudden impact of two young revolutionary poets on the fortunes of this remote property created one of the oddest by-ways of anecdotal topography. It all—the draining of the estuary, Peacock's novel, *Headlong Hall*, and his marriage, Shelley's encounter with the Devil at Tan-yr-Allt, and to some extent the founding of Portmadoc—resulted from a tour "in search of the picturesque" that brought Peacock to Snowdonia in 1811. In the following year he made the acquaintance of Shelley, and put him in the way of leasing Tan-yr-Allt from Maddox. Tan-yr-Allt was then a small new house of the latest Regency type, overlooking the recently laid out piazza of Tremadoc, a town whence Maddox hoped to ship vast quantities of slate from his and the Williamses' quarries. One night, when Shelley was sitting in the drawing-room at Tan-yr-Allt, the French window was burst open by an apparition, furry and horned, which gibbered at him incomprehensible abuse



6.—THE HOUSE, FROM THE ORANGERY.

"COUNTRY LIFE."



7.—THE ORANGERY, BUILT IN 1914.

"COUNTRY LIFE."



Copyright. 8.—THE DRAWING-ROOM. "COUNTRY LIFE."



9.—STAIRS DOWN TO THE BREWHOUSE.

and threatened his life with a pistol. Nothing daunted, Shelley grappled with the fiend, wrested the pistol from him and threw it out of the window into some bushes. Whereupon the Shape disappeared.

The other day, Mr. Williams-Ellis's mother, who lives at Tan-yr-Allt, cut down some laurels, and among the roots found a rusty old pistol. . . . The truth of the episode is that the young poet, in his rambles over the hills, had made himself exceedingly unpopular with the shepherds. They may or may not have known that he was encouraging Maddox to transform the region into a hive of industry. They did know that he used to shoot any sheep he met which seemed to be in poor health. At length a party of shepherds called on him to protest against his behaviour, their spokesman apparently equipped with means of self-defence and the skins of some of Shelley's victims—paraphernalia that his lively imagination transformed into the trappings of Apollyon.

Out of Maddox old William Williams and Thomas Ellis, the progressive squires, Peacock may well have



10.—ENTRANCE HALL AND DINING-ROOM.

developed his hospitable and impetuous Squire Headlong, who, in his first novel, invited to his Merionethshire seat a representative selection of contemporary light and learning. In *Headlong Hall* (1816) he painted the best picture that survives of Brondanw's prospect before its transformation. Three friends set out for a walk from Headlong Hall :

Proceeding through the sublimely romantic pass of Aberglaslynn, their road led along the edge of Traeth Mawr, a vast arm of the sea which they then beheld in all the magnificence of the flowing tide. Another five miles brought them to the embankment which, has since been completed. . . . They walked to the extremity of that part of it which was thrown out from the Caernarvonshire shore. The tide was now ebbing : it had filled the vast basin within, forming a lake about five miles in length and more than one in breadth. As they looked upwards with their backs to the open sea they beheld a scene which no other in this country can parallel. . . . Vast rocks and precipices, intersected with little torrents, formed the barrier on the left : on the right, the triple summit of Moelwyn reared its majestic boundary : in the depth was that sea of mountains the wild and stormy outline of the Snowdonian chain, with the giant Wyddia towering in the midst. The mountain frame remains unchanged, unchangeable ; but the liquid mirror it enclosed is gone.

William Williams of Brondanw, besides his other Peacockian attributes, had the reputation of being a great *bon viveur*, and had taken the precaution of marrying, in 1763, a local heiress, Elizabeth Lloyd of Ddault. He was succeeded by his brother, John Williams, M.A., from 1748 to 1788 rector of Harlington in the then rural shire of Middlesex.

He was succeeded by his sister Catherine, who died in 1806, leaving the Brondanw estates to her great-niece, Jane Bulgen of Bath. She was married to her second cousin, the Rev. Thomas Ellis of Glasfryn (who had christened her) in 1807. It was this Rev. Thomas who was the contemporary of Maddox and Shelley, and whose grandiose notions for the exploitation of his wife's estate have already been alluded to. In starting ambitious slate quarries, all of which were complete failures commercially, but which provide romantic chasms of considerable sublimity to-day, and in co-operating with Maddox in the draining of Traeth Mawr, he dissipated a considerable fortune.

Catherine Williams, who died in 1806, had left Brondanw to her niece on the condition that she added to hers the name of Williams, whence Williams-Ellis. The Rev. Thomas Williams-Ellis was succeeded by the present owner's grandfather, John Williams-Ellis, who married Ellen of Plas Clough, the heiress to that estate. He brought up his family at Brondanw, but, on succeeding his father at Glasfryn in Carnarvonshire, left the place, which gradually deteriorated into a tenement dwelling for seven families. This was its condition when it was made over to Mr. Clough Williams-Ellis, who may be now allowed to take up the tale himself. The following passages are quoted from his book *The Architect*, published by Geoffrey Bles:

Among the seven families that I found installed in the place was that of a rather celebrated salmon poacher, who had found the great chimney of the brew-house [Fig. 13] admirable for the smoking and curing of his fish. It was his precipitate disappearance that gave me my first foothold within the walls of the old house, and I instantly set about contriving a little flat from which I might gradually expand as tenants left or died or could be suitably transplanted to cottages on the estate.

I found two carpenter brothers and a stone mason who would jointly contract to do what was immediately necessary, and the work began.

It has been going on, save for the war, fairly continuously ever since, to my great embarrassment and delight, one thing leading insidiously and appropriately to another.

Gradually yet surely the old house and its rehabilitation became my one really absorbing interest outside my profession—a passion, an obsession if you like.

Yet it was almost part of my profession, it was for its sake that I worked and stinted, for its sake that I chiefly hoped to prosper.

It was, indeed, part of Mr. Williams-Ellis's profession, and provided the first outlet for the "absorbing passion" that he now devotes to the country at large—the preservation of its beauty and the right handling of its simple materials. Since his Brondanw days, Clough (I cannot go on calling him Mr. Etc.) has become one of the busiest of architects, conceiving projects and exploring every species of style and material as impetuously as any of his ancestors developed their estate. Country houses, town houses, Empire exhibitions, schools, ladies' clubs, bridges, cottages in



11.—THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY DRAWING-ROOM.



12.—THE DINING-ROOM—THE KITCHEN IN OLD TIMES.



Copyright. 13.—THE WELL AND HEARTH IN THE BREWHOUSE.

"C.L."

Georgian, vernacular, baroque, modernistic and *ad hoc* styles spring from his brain in never-ending succession. But it is at Brondanw, much better than at Portmeirion, its fantastic offshoot, that we can see the original fundamental Clough—a spontaneous Welshman with incredible energy and an intuitive love of the thick, rough stone of his country. It is this plentiful slabby stone, blue and purple and brown, that inspired most of his operations here; and his understanding of it that enabled him to make such satisfactory use of it. The elementary things that have grown out of it are the many flights of steps and the paved ways of great slate slabs that make the garden a joy to walk in (Fig. 3). A sensuous appreciation of its qualities begot the stout form of the gateway (Fig. 1) and that of the more civilised, but no less massive, orangery (Fig. 7), both built in 1914. The garden is of the bold, formal kind that makes a perfect setting for a bluff, grey house like Brondanw, and a foreground for the vast landscape that it overlooks. A few large parts are formed with yew hedges and laid down in grass, so that no bright colours vie with the sombre hues of mountains, ilex and slate. The flower garden is relegated to hedged compartments in the vicinity of the orangery, where, by a pool here, a wrought-iron balustrade there, each verdant chamber is given individuality.

The entrance to the house is from the forecourt (Fig. 5), which commands the view seen in Fig. 2. A door in the low

older building gives into a passage hall (Fig. 10), beside which is the dining-room (Fig. 12), a former kitchen. The drawing-room, which bears the mark of the Rev. Thomas Ellis's Late Georgian tastes, and has been furnished by his descendant accordingly, is on the first floor of the tall Restoration block. The ground floor is largely taken up by the brewhouse (Figs. 9 and 13), where there is a well beside the great fireplace that the salmon poacher used.

I have not described the rooms in detail because the illustrations show them quite well, and there were so many other interesting things to talk about—not least the feelings of the architect-owner in the days when the old house was all in all to him. Those are the things that one wants to know about a house but can so seldom arrive at—the warmth and the dreams that its substance has generated in human hearts. Houses, though, have a sad time of it. They nurture affection and understanding, and then, when they seem to have caught their master, he plays truant. This one says that his heart still goes out to the place, maturing in ever increasing beauty:

But I can now scarcely even recall the pangs of pleasure that the mere fact of possession once gave me.

It is there, and it is beautiful, and that is enough. If it is movingly beautiful also to my children, I hope that they, or one of them, may be able to live there. If it is not wonderful to them, then I hope it may be enjoyed by someone else who will yet think kindly of those who spent four hundred years, off and on, in making what they admire.

CHRISTOPHER HUSSEY.

THE RE-BIRTH OF A GOLFER

BY BERNARD DARWIN.

THERE are few pleasanter stories and few which make one more bitterly envious than Hans Andersen's story of the Tinder Box. It will be remembered that the soldier had only to rub this box (which, I regret to say, he had stolen from an old witch) and three dogs instantly appeared before him, one with eyes as big as saucers, a second with eyes as big as mill wheels and a third whose eyes were positively of the size of towers. These dogs brought him money—copper, silver or gold—whenever he wanted it; they brought him the beautiful princess in her sleep, and they finally saved him from being executed when he richly deserved it, and frightened the King into giving him the princess as a bride.

They were, in short, the most invaluable animals, and they always set me thinking about the benevolent magician who will some day appear and grant me everything I wish. There is one wish which would, I believe, make us all happy, if we could have it granted. It is a very modest one, being no more than that we should be allowed to begin all over again the learning of some pleasant art. There is bicycling, for instance, which to-day appears merely a tedious method of getting about when there is no car. Yet can anybody deny that there was a romantic thrill in his earliest wobbles on that despised instrument? I can remember wonderfully clearly my first beginnings, a blazing hot day in September on the lawn at home, an angelic and perspiring parent who held me and the bicycle, while we made curious zig-zags across the grass. And then the sensation of going unaided, and the first ride on the open highway! The Huntingdon road at Cambridge is not celebrated for its beauty; it is flat, straight and rather ugly; but when I think of that first bicycle—Somebody's *Grand Modèle de Luxe*—the road seems to me, in retrospect, to have been fringed by fairy trees and jewelled flowers.

I began golf so long ago and at such an immature age that I can recall nothing about it, but it must have been delicious, and I wish it could happen all over again. If one had the strength of mind to do it, I believe it would be well worth while to start again as a one-handed player and pant for the day when one was given a twenty-four handicap. Or, perhaps, left-handed would be better, because then one could laboriously transpose all the rules one had learnt and hold tight with the right hand and loose with the left, and so on. No doubt there would be disappointments in store, but one would be getting slowly better instead of getting rather quickly worse, and there are few sensations more enchanting than the consciousness of improvement.

I have just had a letter from a golfer who began again left-handed, and his experiences are rather interesting. He did not do it deliberately from a spirit of adventure, but because, owing to a rheumatic left shoulder, he could play no longer in the ordinary way. So, after twenty years of right-handed playing, he became a humble novice, bought fresh clubs and stood on the other side. "And do you know," he says, "it

was great fun." I am sure it must have been, and I envy him the luxury of his feelings in that new blossoming. "I was a little better, of course," he adds, "than when I started playing right-handed, because I knew the importance of a steady head, firm stance, and so on." That seems rather surprising. I will not be so cynical as to say that these pieces of knowledge do more harm than good, but I should not have expected them to counterbalance the strangeness and topsy-turveydom of being on the wrong side of the ball. Many years ago I amused myself by cultivating a left-handed iron, and though I did attain to hitting a teed ball with a modest accuracy, I never felt anything but horribly clumsy, a duffer with no touch and no eye, who never would be anything but a duffer.

My correspondent was less humble, for he came to the conclusion that, whereas his lowest handicap in his unregenerate days had been 8 or 9, left-handed he was going to be "a real tiger." Well, he wasn't; that is, in brief, the sad end of the story. He soon found that he was "committing the old mistakes in a very much accentuated form." He played matches against "old, old men and middle-aged ladies," and I rather gather that these despised persons would sometimes have beaten him, if it had not been for one circumstance; his shoulder was not so ill but that he retained the power of playing quite short strokes right-handed. Thus he could sometimes, when apparently *in extremis*, lay a pitch dead and dash the cup of victory from the old ladies' lips. The end of the story is not really sad, because in the last paragraph of his letter he tells me that his shoulder was suddenly cured, so that he could play right-handed once more. Moreover, he plays a little better for the discipline which he has undergone. Perhaps he carries one left-handed club in his bag and, when his ball lies apparently unplayable under a wall, he plays a brilliant shot with it and gives his enemy a shock just as he used to do to the old ladies.

To be able to play equally well from either side of the ball would be a wonderful thing. I am not thinking of that occasional ball wedged under a fence; I have just conceived the luminous idea that to this happy ambidextrous golfer the fear of slicing would be dead. If the wind blew hard on his back when he stood to the ball right-handed, he would just stand the other way and take a left-handed club and the slicy wind would become a hooky one: a friend and helper instead of a tyrannical foe. The prevailing wind at St. Andrews, in my experience at any rate, blows from left to right on the way out, and one is often so exhausted with fighting the slice and keeping out of the whins, that one has no energy left to revel in the hook on the inward half. To the ambidextrous golfer the round would be one long delicious orgy of hooking. With what freedom would he lash at his ball! What a splendid, virile, fearless creature he would be! When I get my tinder-box, here is another gift for me to wish for. Meanwhile, if I could find it, I would go out and practise with that old left-handed iron of mine; but, alas! I know it has been ruthlessly swept away to a jumble sale long since.