



IOLO MORGANWG

The great and strange genius



John I Howells

PERCHED on the edge of the Thaw Valley, the village of Flemingston enjoys a view which is unusual in the rather flat Vale of Glamorgan. Indeed, the view comes as a surprise as you reach the edge of the village, with the broad valley stretching below.

The village obtained its present name about the beginning of the 14th century; from the Norman, Philip le Fleming, who acquired land there, perhaps from the Nerber family of St Athan. He is certainly mentioned in 1315; and in 1530 William or his son, Christopher Fleming, were living there.



WELSH STYLE



Their house was Flemingston Court, probably built at the beginning of the 16th century, although there is a tradition that this was earlier a fortified manor house or even the site of a castle. The house has an associated courtyard with a ruined building at one corner, and there was originally a detached kitchen.

The last male Fleming at the house was a 17th century William. After him, the house went to the Thomases of Llanmihangel Place, the family of Williams's mother; and in 1684 Sir Humphrey Edwin bought it, with other Thomas property. Sir Humphrey was Lord Mayor of London in 1697 and through descendants on the female side, Flemingston passed to the Wyndhams, and then the Wyndham-Quins, Earls of Dunraven.

For several hundred years, Flemingston Court has served as a farmhouse and it was called Castle Farm at one time. A Mr Mordecai Jenkins obtained it from the Dunraven Estate earlier this century, and in 1941 Jack Thomas, the father of the present owner, James Thomas bought it.

The Thomases moved there from nearby Picketston, for that farm had largely been swallowed up by the RAF at adjoining St Athan, although James and Olive Thomas's son John — with his wife of last year, Rhiannon Lougher from Treguff — still farms the 40 acres left at Picketston, as well as helping with the 500 acres of Flemingston which has cattle, sheep and corn.

The house has been called by the experts "a classic example of a storeyed, sub-medieval house". It has stone mulioned windows and a cross-passage with solid, stone-arch doors at either end. The hall and parlour both have original ceilings framed with oak moulded beams. The old kitchen, now the dining room, has its original bread oven.

The first floor Great Chamber has long ago been subdivided, more usefully into three.

Before Flemingston Court was sold the tenants for several hundred years were the Jenkins family. They went to Boverton Place Farm, but returned in 1931 to Gregory Farm just over the way from Flemingston Court, and which is now run by Rees Jenkins and his wife Barbara, who was a Leyshon from Pen-coed. Ancestors had been at Gregory too from at least 1700. The 200 acres supports sheep and cattle, although the original cowsheds and farmyard have seen life as freshly laundered homes during the last three years.

I was able to see entries for the deaths of some of the Jenkins ancestors (three Davids in succession) in the tiny church of St Michael adjoining Flemingston Court, where Mr Thomas is the churchwarden. St Michael's is of Norwegian foundation, earlier than the 14th century church we see now; and there are two early 20th century memorial windows to the Jenkins family. In a recess lies the effigy of one of the original Flemings, Lady Joan, in 14th century wimple and with Norman-French inscription.

In the church too, is a memorial erected



by the Countess of Dunraven and other memorials of Flemingston's most famous resident, Iolo Morganwg, the bardic name of Edward Williams, one of the most remarkable characters in Welsh history, known far and wide in his day. To quote Gwynfor Evans. "Wales has never known a greater nor a stranger genius than Iolo Morganwg."

Iolo was born in 1747 at Pennon, Llancarfan just over the Thaw Valley, and before he was a teenager the family were to be found in Flemingston, living in a small cottage, now long demolished, which was in the yard of Gregory Farm. Iolo, like his father, and his son, Taliesin, was a stonemason; and this took him all over the country, including a spell in London, although his base was always effectively Flemingston, where he died and was buried, in 1826.

Iolo became famous as a Welsh scholar, poet and antiquary, copying all the Welsh manuscripts he could in the private libraries of his day, such as that of fellow-dreamer Thomas Johnes in his Xanadu at the exotic Hafod, near Aberystwyth. Both were careless with money but at opposite ends of the scale, and Taliesin is reputed to have been born in Cardiff jail where Iolo had been placed for bankruptcy.

Among his many accomplishments was his ability to invent — sounds better than "forge" — historical facts and manuscripts to support his view that the Welsh literature, bardic

tradition had an unbroken connection with the ancient druids and, what is more, that his beloved Glamorgan was the spiritual cradle of that tradition. His scholarship and his poetic ability meant that it was half-a-century before his work became suspect.

What has lasted was his Gorsedd of Bards and its unique contribution to the National Eisteddfod, so that Iolo is often regarded as the father of the present-day festival.

Lewis Morgannwg, the esteemed and undisputedly historical 16th century bard of Glamorgan, addressed one of his poems to the Flemings of Flemingston Court. I do not know whether Iolo did the same to the Jenkinsons who were resident in his day, a stone's throw from his cottage. I doubt it, given his radical views.

There is a hint of the old order in the church, with its front three pews still bearing the names, first Flemingston Court, second Gregory, third Fferm Wen. Seemingly the old order never changeth. But of course, it does probably more so here, in the last three years, than previously. The rector, John Binney, has several churches, so does not live in Flemingston, and there are Pughs at the Rectory. What was presumably on part of church land, the old Glebe Cottage, is now lived in by Eric and Fiona Cooke from Cheshire. It is everyone's dream cottage — thatch, roses over the door, and that splendid view over the Thaw.