

WENVOE CASTLE

A PIECE OF NEGLECTED NOBLE ART

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UNTIL THE recent controversies about modern architecture, much fuelled by the trenchant views of the Prince of Wales, brought several of our leading architects to wider public notice, few people could probably have named many more than the three most famous practitioners of that noble but neglected art from Britain's past — to wit, Christopher Wren, Robert Adam and, from our own century, Edwin Lutyens.

Neither Wren nor Lutyens, it seems, were invited to design anything in Wales. On the other hand, Robert Adam, whose name is synonymous with the British stately home — one thinks of the likes of Kedleston or Culzean Castle — most definitely was, and several large schemes for buildings in Wales survive among his archive of drawings preserved in Sir John Soane's museum in London.

Sadly, however, hardly any of these grand designs were turned into reality. There was for example a plan for the rebuilding of Cardiff Castle. Another was for large extensions to Wynnstay in Clwyd, the famous house of the Williams-Wynns, although Adam did design their splendid house in London. Then there was the palatial mansion

Adam sketched out for Richard Parry in Llanrhaiadr near Denbigh and more intriguingly, an elegant classical villa for Thomas Johnes at Stanage Park, Radnorshire, who had it shelved when he decided to make his home at Hafod in Cardiganshire and create that never-to-be-forgotten paradise in the wilds of Cwmystwyth.

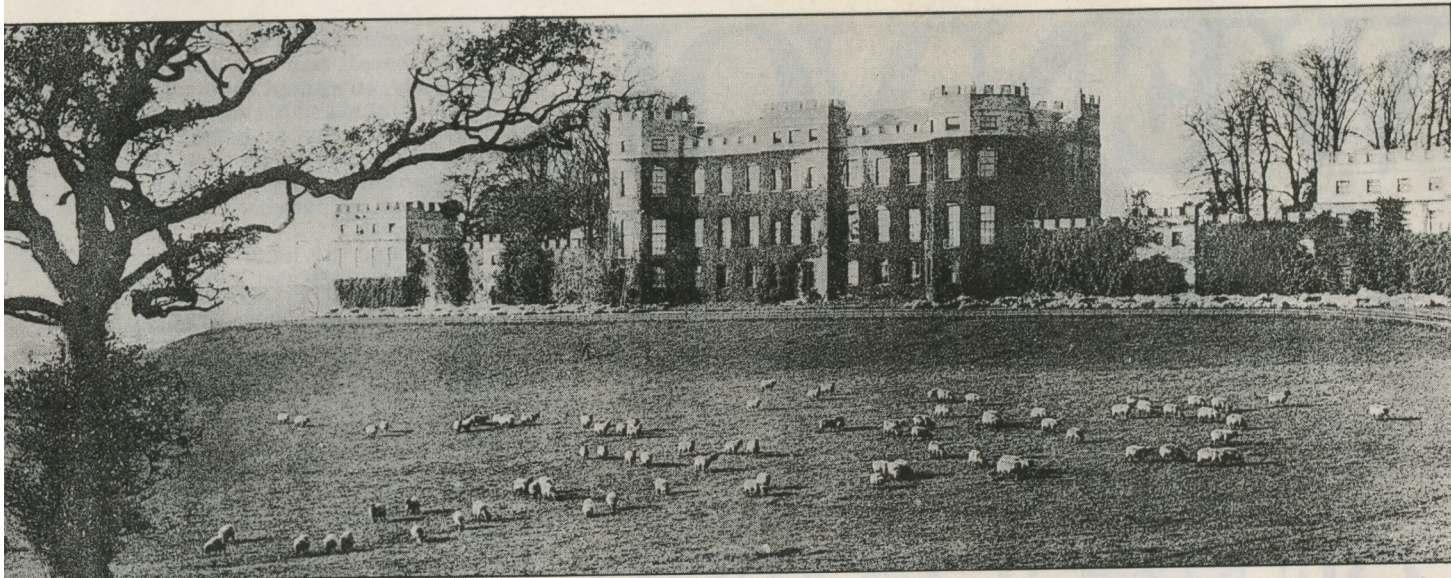
So, to find the hand of Adam anywhere at all in Wales today, one can resort only to two places: firstly to Ruabon church in Clwyd, to see his beautiful white marble font and probably the monument to W W Wynn of the Wynnstay family, and secondly to Wenvoe Golf Club, just outside Cardiff, to see the sad remnant of the once magnificent Wenvoe Castle that he designed.

When completed in the late 1770's, Wenvoe would have been among the finest houses standing anywhere in Wales. Viewed from across its broad parkland, a mock-castellated building of immense length would have been on view, running along the crest of an artificially formed ridge. The centre part was the house itself, three-and-a-half storeys high, with mock octagonal corner towers. Away from it on both sides, stretched immensely long screen walls which eventually reached large square three-storey pavilions — each the size of a decent house — with smaller, two-storey pavilions breaking up the long stretches of wall at half-way point.

On the other side, the entrance front was on a more welcoming scale, being a storey lower (on a raised ground level) and with a large round-headed door and matching window above, breaking up the regularity of the serried ranks of openings as on the other side.

Surprisingly, this great house, quite fit for a duke, was not built for a man of any such consequence, nor even for a powerful, old established landowner. Rather Wenvoe was built for an obscure merchant, Peter Birt of Armin in Yorkshire, who having made a tremendous fortune in his home area, decided to move elsewhere to display that





wealth — away from his associations with trade, to start a new life as a landed gentleman.

The Wenvoe estate was well established. Originally there had been a small medieval castle but since c.1600 the well-known family of Thomas had been firmly seated here. In 1694 the family had received a baronetcy and their line still exists today, but the third baronet, Sir Edmund Thomas, MP for Wiltshire, had disastrously over-reached himself both electioneering and in improving the estate and his son had been forced to sell the estate a few years after his death in 1767.

For Peter Birt, casting around for somewhere to establish himself, the sale of his prestigious place, with a lordship of the Manor and patronage of the church living thrown in, was timely. The house itself was extremely large by Welsh standards, having 24 fireplaces recorded in the Hearth Tax returns of the 1670's and it had no doubt been further improved by the carefree Sir Edmund. But Peter Birt, the new man with new money was having none of this. The old house had to go entirely; the most fashionable new architect of the day must be engaged and a great new house, greater than the last must be created.

Robert Adam drew out plans and a skilled local master mason, Thomas Roberts, was employed. The only plans that now survive are those among Adam's own working papers and represent his first ideas. They differ from the house as built in several ways but changes of detail are common as a building takes shape.

The fate of the final set of plans can sadly all too easily be guessed at, seeing that the terrible fire of 1910 which destroyed much of the house, claimed the library and its contents. Samuel Lewis, author of the invaluable *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* appears to have seen another intermediate set in the 1830's when writing up the parish of Wenvoe. He writes, "The principal front facing South, extends 374 feet in length: the wings, which according to the original design, were to have formed two magnificent conservatories, terminate at each extremity in a square tower." Why these great

conservatories were not built is uncertain; perhaps even Birt's pocket had its limits.

Birt remained in Yorkshire while his house was being built in 1776-77. This is fortunate because communication with him therefore had to be committed to letter, rather than conveyed by word of mouth. No letters from Adam survive but Birt's letters from Thomas Roberts do and allow a fascinating insight into the building of the house.

These reveal that while Adam had naturally designed all the important interiors, he had left the areas that did not interest him entirely to Roberts, who therefore had to agree with Birt how all the top floor and servants' quarters should be laid out.

Sadly, little is known of the interiors, which must have been resplendent with the marvellous decorative details in which Adam excelled. The only record seems to be three murky photographs taken by the *South Wales Daily News* in the early years of this century, which merely hint at what was there, by showing ornamental details in the dining room and the four pillared archway at the back of the front hall. The treatment of the drawing room, which must have been the grandest in the house, can only be guessed at.

Attached to the eastern pavilion at the end of the long facade was, and happily still is, a fine stable block. There is however no evidence that Adam designed this and from the way it was sited, slightly awkward, it looks like an afterthought. The style is in contrast to the house, being classical and not battlemented and all the evidence points to this being the work of Adam's rival architect Henry Holland. It is certainly close in design to a stable block Holland designed at Berrington Hall, Herefordshire in the late 1770's and there is a confusing, but nonetheless definite, reference in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1875 to Holland having worked at Wenvoe.

Holland's involvement is easy to explain, as he had succeeded where Adam had failed in gaining the commission to rebuild Cardiff Castle and was no doubt at Cardiff quite frequently waiting on Lord Mount Stuart,

his patron there. Adam on the other hand never appears to have come to Wenvoe once he had made out the plans and Thomas Roberts had been put in charge of the works. As such it is slightly ironic that Adam's greater work should have almost vanished, where Holland's elegant afterthought has survived.

Despite this fine monument to good taste that Birt had created for himself, he had no sons to continue his line. Ann, eldest of his two daughters had married in 1773, a widower Robert Jenner from an old south of England family and it was he and his descendants who made Wenvoe their home until the present century.

By the time that World War One was approaching, the era of country house prosperity that Birt had enjoyed had long vanished. Rents had fallen and taxes had risen. At home at Wenvoe in 1910 was Mrs Jenner, long a widow, without children.

In February of that year, that most terrible of all fates overtook the house. The whole of the east wing was gutted before the blaze was checked, consuming many beautiful rooms including the whole of the library.

For a few years the house clung on to half-life, but the war years were even harder than before and soon after peace was declared, Wenvoe Castle was almost entirely taken down. A dismal photograph in the *South Wales Daily News* shows its dying moments.

So often, the aftermath has been to engulf the site and surrounding parkland in suburbia. Happily here, all is not lost. The fine parkland has become a golf course and the end pavilion of Adam's house has been converted to a clubhouse — minus its castellated roofline. Even today, just this remarkably large fragment, beside the huge empty platform of the vanished house, conveys something of the masterhand of Adam's genius with the carefully measured height and proportion of the windows and the dentilled cornice at second floor level. The fine stable block remains in excellent repair as offices, shop and storage for the golf club, casting long evening shadows over the fall of Adam. □

