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The Castle Custodian

THE VALE of Glamorgan is dotted with castle and manor houses, some ruined, some lived in. A few go back to Norman times, though not quite as far back as Robert Fitzhamon, who set himself up at the end of the 11th century as Lord of Glamorgan, with his headquarters in Cardiff.

In Tudor times there were several powerful families in the Vale, with their splendid mansions. The 18th century gentleman and the 19th century industrialists all left their mark on the fertile Vale and its architecture.

Fonmon Castle, is now the home of Sir Brooke Boothby, the 16th Baronet who regards himself as the custodian of the estate, to be protected, preserved and passed on to the next generation. Sir Brooke is chairman of the committee of the Historic Houses Association, dealing with problems of inheritance of landed estates. As an economist he knows all the pitfalls.

Fonmon Castle is remarkable in that it has been lived in continuously since it was built about 1200, a record for the county. One of Fitzhamon's knights, Oliver St John, was granted the Manor of Fonmon, near Rhoose. A good site was chosen for defence — a secluded position about a mile from the Bristol Channel, partly surrounded by a ravine.

A later St John built his rectangular stone Keep, which is still the core of the castle, with its six-feet thick walls. The entrance to the castle grounds, over the new bypass, accentuates its fortified position.

The St John family stayed at Fonmon for more than 450 years, building a large extension in the 13th century and another in the 16th century. From about 1430 though, when another Oliver inherited estates in England by marriage, Fonmon was not the family's main home. One branch lived at Lydiard Park near Swindon until 1943, becoming Viscounts Bolingbroke.

The only basic change of family





ownership of Fonmon occurred in 1656, when the estate was sold to Colonel Philip Jones, an ancestor of the present owner Sir Brooke Boothby.

Colonel Jones was the founder of the family fortune and probably its most illustrious member. He was born in, or near Swansea, and although only of yeoman stock, his ancestors could be traced back to the princely house of Brecon. He had an accelerating rise to fame, due to his being a staunch and able supporter of Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War, playing an important part in the Battle of St Fagans.

He acquired the governorship of Swansea and Cardiff Castles, as well as others; became MP for Brecon, but most important of all was Cromwell's main advisor on South Wales affairs and latterly the Controller of the Household. In this last capacity it was Colonel Jones who supervised Cromwell's funeral in 1658, a ceremony of royal proportions with burial in Westminster Abbey and funds of £60,000.

One of the bills for the funeral is still in Fonmon, £1,573. 11s 2d for rich velvets, satin and taffeta. Remarkably, at the Restoration of the Monarchy, although Philip was impeached before Parliament, he bounced back and was allowed to retain his lands at Fonmon, even becoming Sheriff in 1671. An outstanding man, whose striking portrait can be seen in the castle, he was buried in Penmark Church, the ancestral church of the family since then.

There is a wealth of paintings at Fonmon, particularly portraits by such as Hogarth, Reynolds, Lely and Hoppner. A dashing picture of Robert Jones III seems a perfect indication of the pleasure-loving owner of the mid-18th century, who transformed the interior of the castle with elegant rococo plasterwork, particularly in the spacious hall and beautifully proportioned library-cum-drawing room. The distinctive Georgian windows were also put in at this time. Robert had to flee abroad from his creditors and chose France, against the advice of John Wesley, from whose rigidly-disciplined school Robert had absconded in his youth. The Wesleys were regular visitors to Fonmon and the Wesley Society visited this year to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the death of Charles Wesley.

The last of the Joneses was Oliver Henry, who died in 1917, the property then passing through his niece Clara, who had married Sir Seymour Boothby of Ashbourne in Derbyshire. Sir Seymour was the 14th in line of baronets created in 1644 — ironically for the family's loyalty to Charles I before he was dispatched by Cromwell.

The Boothbys can be traced back to Saxon times in England. One became a general and was equerry to the Duke of York of the time. Several were patrons of the arts and literature, including among their friends, Dr Johnson, Rousseau and Nelson. The collection of Boothby family pictures came to Fonmon with Sir Seymour: one particularly attractive one is of Maria Boothby, painted in 1780 by Joseph Wright.

Sir Hugo Boothby who died in 1986, became one of the leading public figures in South Wales, High Sheriff and Vice Lieutenant of Glamorgan, then Lieutenant of South Glamorgan, besides serving an innumerable councils and committees at national and local level. His wife, Ann, Lady Boothby, came from the Homfray family at Penllyn Castle, and still lives at Fonmon.

Sir Brooke Boothby has been High Sheriff. His wife Lady Georgina, is the daughter of Sir John and Lady Russell. Sir John had a distinguished career in the Diplomatic Service. They have two young daughters, Aliki, named after Lady Georgina's Greek mother, and Francesca.

Fonmon's 700-acre estate extends to the Bristol Channel and is mostly arable farming. Sir Brooke runs this very much as a business, as well as the Fontygary Caravan Park and the Fontygary Inn in which he was born, for it was then the Dower House of the castle. His office opens off the family drawing room at Fonmon, so he is always near his work when at home — and home this is; not a museum piece, though there are plans to open the house a little more for private functions.

Sir Brooke Boothby has some of the traditional characteristics of the gentry and aristocracy. After Eton he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he began to read mathematics

but found his resultant degree in economics more useful in running his estate. His main recreation is shooting — when he has time. His phone was constantly ringing and his secretary popping in when I was there.

The estate, the farms and the caravan park are run very much as a business, employing up to 100 in the summer. The annual running costs of £100,000 or so mean constant effort is needed, besides which Sir Brooke has the responsibility for seeing that the estate is passed on to future generations in good health.

Since their marriage in 1976 Sir Brooke and Lady Georgina have lived at Fonmon. There are no armies of living-in staff, though several permanent ones. Everyday living is very much on the domestic scale, though visitors have recently included the Prince and Princess of Wales, and the Kents. There is a photograph of a much earlier visit by Queen Mary, looking a little more relaxed than she normally did.

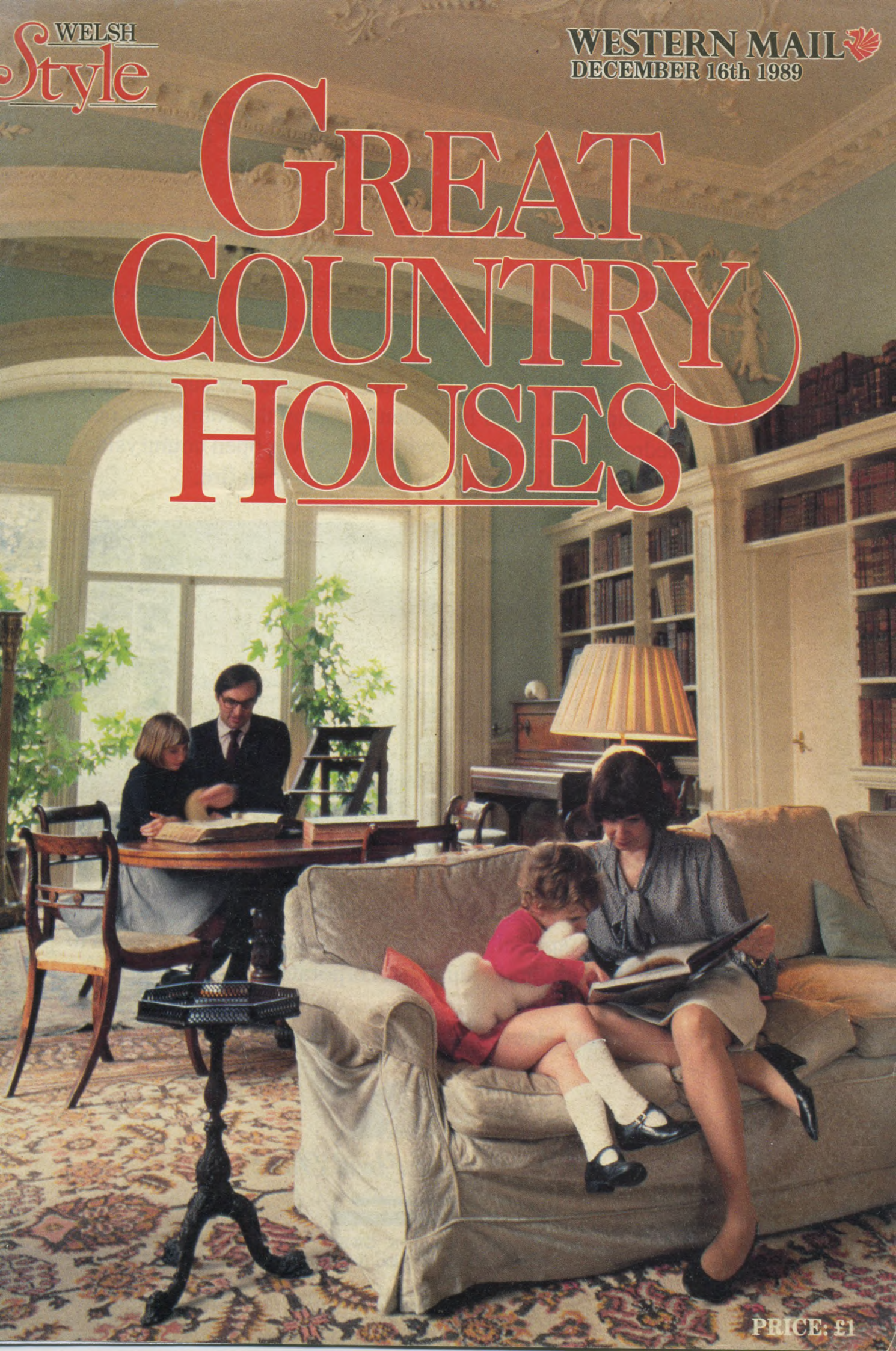
The Boothbys intend Fonmon to be around for a few more centuries yet. □



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