



TURN OFF the A48 just west of Bridgend and you will soon find yourself in another century. Merthyr Mawr comes as a surprise, a village of scattered cottages with white walls and thatched roofs, a post office and church.

The River Ogmore flows along its eastern side, just before it joins with the Ewenny River. There is an air of peace and well-being.

The reason for this is that Merthyr Mawr is still an estate village, privately owned since the beginning of the last century by the same family, the Nicholls. The present Lady of the Manor, Mrs Jennifer Ann McLaggan, was a Nicholl, and married Mr Murray McLaggan in 1959 after meeting in Greece.

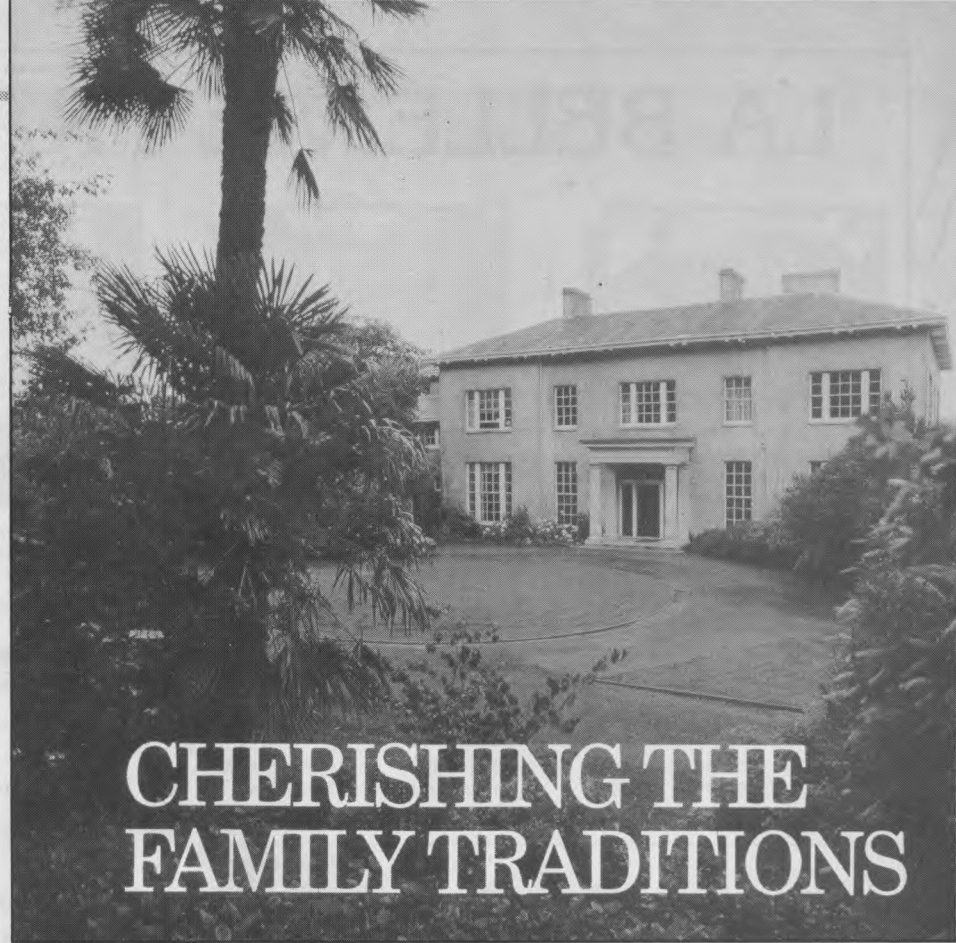
They have lived at Merthyr Mawr House since 1967, and have always run the house as a family home, though the three children — John, Rory and Iona — are now grown up. The main living quarters are on the first floor, the grander rooms downstairs being used regularly for charity functions, concerts and special occasions.

The estate is 4,000 acres, of which 1,300 acres they farm themselves, including the pick-your-own fruit farm. They run a camp site, and the car park at the popular Candleston, near the extensive sand dunes of Merthyr Mawr Warren, which contain evidence of settlements from the stone, bronze and iron ages.

The well-kept gardens of the house contain several hundred types of shrubs and trees, many of them on a hill next to the house, which has on it the medieval St Roques chapel. This was probably a place of rest for pilgrims to St Davids or a retreat for sick monks. It now contains two ancient sculptured Celtic stones, known as the Goblin and Conbelanus Stones, which were moved there last century at the suggestion of Iolo Morgannwg. Nearby is an enormous natural hole in the ground, known euphemistically as the Big Dell.

Mr McLaggan was born in London and went to Winchester, and New College, Oxford. He is the son of Sir Douglas McLaggan, who was an ear, nose and throat surgeon, consultant to the Royal Family. Mr McLaggan taught law at Christchurch, Oxford for 10 years.

Since living in South Wales he has



CHERISHING THE FAMILY TRADITIONS

become very involved with the area, being High Sheriff in 1977, chairman of the Historic Houses Association and vice-chairman of the National Trust for Wales, chairman of the Wales Advisory Committee for the Forestry Commission associated with the Glamorgan Naturalists, the Boundary Commission, and he is a Justice of the Peace.

Merthyr Mawr House came through Mrs McLaggan, and was built by her great-great-great grandfather, Sir John Nicholl, between 1806 and 1809, to the classical design of Henry Wood, of Bristol. Sir John was an MP for many years, though never for Glamorgan. He became an influential lawyer in London, King's Advocate, Privy Councillor, Dean of the Arches and Judge of the Perogative Court of Canterbury, and finally Judge of the High Court of Admiralty.

Sir John's family, the Nicholls, were well established gentry in Glamorgan, having associations with the Great House and the Ham, Llantwit Major; Great House, Llanmaes; and later, Dimlands, Cowbridge, and Nash Manor. Sir John owned land at Tondy, which still belongs to the family, but he wanted a country estate suitable to his new importance.

The Merthyr Mawr estate was at one time part of the Stradling lands (of St Donat's). The last of the Stradlings died in 1738 and in 1755 the estate was divided into four, the Merthyr Mawr part going to the Bowens of Gower. They sold to Sir John, who created a new Merthyr Mawr House, demolishing most of the old mansion to the south west of the present house, and altering the road and village. He also acquired nearby Candleston Castle, a fortified manor on the edge of the dunes, now a ruin cared for by the McLaggans.

Sir John married Judy Birt, of Wenvoe Castle (Robert Adam's only house in Wales, finally demolished in 1918). Their son John also had a distinguished legal career, and married Jane Harriot Talbot, of Margam. He built the present church, in which is the family vault. The original church was dedicated to St Myfor or Mour from which comes the name of the village.

The next owner, John Cole Nicholl, was an addictive book collector, which caused problems when he married Mary de la Beche Dillwyn, of Swansea, and not only financial ones, as Mr McLaggan describes in his paper on the splendid library at Merthyr Mawr, with its 20,000 and more books scattered all over the house. The library has some beautiful bookcases based on one original from the estate of Dr William Dodd, to whom Dr Johnson was referring when he said that "*when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.*"

Mary de la Beche won in the end, although land had to be sold after John Cole's death. She afterwards made some remarkable journeys all over the world, collecting butterflies, and died in 1922. Her sister, Amy Dillwyn, was also a remarkable woman who won respect and fame as an industrialist and took the youngest of the Nicholl boys, Rice, as her successor.

John Cole was Sheriff in 1884, as was his son John Ilyd Dillwyn Nicholl in 1899. His son, Robert Ilyd, married Helen Bethia Stuart Fuller, of Storrington, who still lives in The Cottage, at Merthyr Mawr. They were the parents of Mrs McLaggan, as well as her two sisters, Diana and Primrose. So, in 200 years, the name has changed. There are no butlers, governesses or laundry maids but the estate and the family traditions are still cherished. □