

PENLLYN CASTLE

The earliest part of Penllyn Castle dates from about 1100, and may indeed be earlier. It consists of two sides of a square tower and the lower courses of the north side contain herring-bone stonework which in England is normally found in Anglo Saxon buildings.

The early history of the Castle is uncertain, but it would seem likely to have been built by a Welsh Chief or Princeling. Like most of the strongholds of South Wales, it soon came into the hands of the Normans and by 1262 there is a record of it belonging to the Norris family. They remained there until the late 14th Century when heiress married one of the Turbervilles. The Turberville family remained in occupation until 1702. Comparatively little is known of their life there but it seems likely that they remodelled the house and it gradually became less of a castle and more of a manor house. It would seem that each generation tended to build forward from the Keep. In 1616 the Turberville retainers had a running fight in the streets of Cowbridge with the retainers of the Bassetts of Beupre, which lasted for three days and finally reached the Court of Star Chamber. Apart from this we hear little, possibly because the Turbervilles were Catholics. They did, however, serve as Sheriffs in the 16th Century, Christopher Turberville in 1549 and again in 1568, and another Christopher in 1615. After this there were no Turberville Sheriffs from Penllyn probably because of the anti-Catholic laws.

The Turbervilles sold the house in 1702 to one of the Seys, a local family of Boverton Place, near Llantwit Major, who produced two or three holders of the office of Attorney General for Wales. I have not been able to find out exactly which of the Seys purchased it, but he rebuilt it and after his death in 1718 his son sold it to the Stradlings of St. Donats. This family very shortly died and their large estates were, after a long law suit, divided into three. Penllyn was in the third, which went to the Mansels of Margam. Bussy, 4th and last Lord Mansel, left the Penllyn Estate to his daughter, Lady Vernon, a widow whose only child had died in infancy and she in turn left it to her companion, Miss Gwinnett, who was a member of the family living at Cottrell at that time. Incidentally, her brother, Admiral Button Gwinnett, had settled in Maryland and was one of those who signed the Declaration of Independence. Miss Gwinnett rebuilt the house, which had apparently become derelict, round about 1790. Grosse, in his tour of Wales, refers to the ruins of Mr. Sergeant Seys' house. This was in 1785, but in 1804, Donavon, in his tour refers to Miss Gwinnett's new mansion. Thus a date of about 1790 to 1800 seems appropriate.

Miss Gwinnett died in 1817 and left the property to one of the Villiers family, relatives of Lady Vernon, but with the condition that they live there for most of the year and by 1846 this condition had become difficult for them so they sold to the Homfrays. John Homfray, the purchaser, was the son of Sir Jeremias Homfray who had founded the Penydarren Iron Works in Merthyr and whose ancestors had been Iron Masters in Staffordshire.

^{Richard}
John Homfray had married Anna Maria, daughter of a Cardiff Merchant family, in 1821, sadly she died the year they bought Penllyn and he rebuilt Penllyn Church in her memory. It is said that his son, J.R. Homfray, visited the Paris Exhibition of 1861 with his wife and arranged for a French firm to come over and decorate the drawing room, which is in the Louis XV style that was very popular in the Paris of the Third Empire.

It would seem that Penllyn either became a farmhouse or was not lived in after the time of the Seys, and by the time Miss Gwinnett inherited it, it became derelict and whatever garden there had been had no doubt disappeared. It seems possible that the Cedars and perhaps some other trees date from the time of her rebuilding, but the majority of the planting was carried out by John Homfray and his son, J.R. Homfray, during the period 1860 to 1870. When I purchased Penllyn in 1961, the shrubberies along the drive consisted almost entirely of Laurel with some Rhododendron Ponticum and my objective has been to retain the outline of this Victorian plan while planting a wide variety of shrubs which, as they grow up, will fill the space that once was Laurel.

The garden in general is fairly mild and we are able to grow some fairly tender Rhododendrons although their buds are susceptible to frost in a year such as this, but plants such as Drimys Winteri suffered more this year from wind than cold and this is the first time it has been damaged since it was planted in 1963. We have also flowered Puya Alpestris out of doors and it has not suffered this last winter. Naturally, most of the Rhododendrons are fairly small, but are making good growth and flourish in the more or less neutral soil. The rock is lime and the subsoil clay, but for 100 years or so the leaves have been swept into the shrubberies which has given a very good quality top soil. The garden is, however, a young one by comparison to so many of those open today.

C.G.C.

Vol 14
96

4.5.78.