

THERE HAVE been Nicholls at Merthyr Mawr House since the beginning of the 19th century and the history of the family and of the mansion makes fascinating reading.

The Nicholl family originated in Cornwall. In the 16th century a branch of the family settled in Llantwit Major becoming mainly lawyers, doctors and clerics.

In 1759 John Nicholl, destined to achieve distinction in judicial and parliamentary circles, was born to John Nicholl and his wife, Elizabeth Havard. He was the second son and his meteoric career was to bring the family name a hitherto unknown eminence.

He was educated at Cowbridge, Bristol and St. John's College, Oxford. After acquiring degrees of bachelor and doctor of civil law, he was admitted in 1785, as an advocate at the bar of Doctors' Commons and embarked upon a legal career that brought swift rewards.

In 1791 he was appointed a commissioner to inquire into the state of law in Jersey and, in 1798, he became King's Advocate and received the customary knighthood.

Sir John, a staunch Tory, enjoyed a long parliamentary career.

He made a positive contribution to legislation in promoting the Ecclesiastical Courts Act of 1829.

As Dean of the Arches and Judge of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury he was appointed a Privy Councillor and subsequently Lord of Trade and Plantations.

Towards the end of his long and active life, Sir John was appointed Judge of the High Court of Admiralty, an office he retained until his death in 1838.

In 1787 he had married Judy Birt, youngest daughter and co-heiress of Peter Birt, of Wenvoe Castle, and they had two sons (one of whom died in infancy) and three daughters, and, despite the claims of public office, was a devoted husband and father.

Elevated site

In 1804, Sir John bought the Merthyr Mawr estate for £18,000 (the estate had formed part of the Stradling family of St. Donat's inheritance from the 15th to the 18th century but in 1783, the Stradling line had died out).

The estate comprised over 800 acres, the nucleus of which was the old mansion house with its stables, coach house, barns and dovecote, set among gardens and orchard.

Sir John demolished the old house set in a small park at the eastern end of the village and built Merthyr Mawr House on an elevated site overlooking the Ogmore and Ewenny rivers.

A series of mishaps and disasters dogged the building work and it was not until the summer of 1809 that Sir John and his family took up residence at Merthyr Mawr in a house still far from finished.

The family maintained a full retinue of domestic servants — butler, under-butler, housekeeper, cook, lady's maid, housemaids, kitchen maid, dairy maid, still-room maid and laundry maid. When the children were young a governess and a nurse were added to the household.

Maintenance of the stables, horses and carriages called for the full-time service of a coachman, second coachman, groom and footman. A full-time gardener was employed to look after the extensive grounds.

Sir John died at Merthyr Mawr in August 1838 at the age of 79 and the house and estate passed to his only son, John, lawyer and Member of Parliament for Cardiff, who, in 1822, had married Jane Harriot Talbot, of Margam. The couple had six sons and four daughters.

In those days it was fashionable for a gentleman to go to

by
PAT HURLEY



RIGHT: The lawns in front of the west face of Merthyr Mawr House made an ideal place for practising golf shots for members of the Nicholl family at the turn of the century.



Nicholls of Merthyr Mawr

Rome for three months every year taking with him his family, his servants and his carriage. Jane, it is said, persuaded her husband to take such a trip where he caught a fever from which he died in 1853, at the age of 59.

His eldest son, John Cole Nicholl inherited the property and as well as looking after the estate travelled a great deal. It was during his lifetime that a second storey to the domestic wing of Merthyr Mawr House was added.

John Cole Nicholl's main interest was in the territorial. Because of widespread fears of invasion by the French the Volunteer Movement was born and rifle ranges were built at Newbridge Fields and at Candeston. John built an armoury at Merthyr Mawr.

He married Mary de la Beche Dillwyn, of Swansea, whose grandfather founded the famous Swansea china works and it was the Dillwyn fortune which finally paid off the mortgages on the estate incurred in the lifetime of Sir John's son.

John Cole Nicholl died in 1894. His granddaughter, 85-year-old Miss Olive Nicholl, now living quietly with her sister, Mrs. Gladys Campbell, at Newton, Porthcawl, was just three years of age when her father, John Illtyd Dillwyn Nicholl, inherited Merthyr Mawr estate.

One of five children (two boys and three girls) she retains many happy memories of the near half-century she lived at Merthyr Mawr House.

Her father, who may still be remembered by the older inhabitants of Bridgend, was the first chairman of Penybont Rural District Council when it was formed in 1896.

He was also chairman of the Board of Guardians of the Cottage Homes which was founded by his father.

Essentially a countryman, he knew every field, wood and stream in the Vale of Glamorgan. His knowledge of trees was profound and he was able to fell a tree to within a foot of where he wished.

His knowledge of bird and animal life, of geology and astronomy was also boundless and many a dark night would see him outdoors with his children instructing them on the planets and the stars and teaching them to find their way in the dark.

"Despite the rigid dictates of Victorian upbringing and



Young Robert Nicholl, who was to inherit the Merthyr Mawr Estate, sits between his mother and father, Col. and Mrs. John Illtyd Dillwyn Nicholl, while behind, making up the family group are (from left to right): Gladys, elder brother John, Rachel and Olive; Mrs. Gladys Campbell and Miss Olive Nicholl.



The unchanged face of Merthyr Mawr House. This view from the front was taken more than 60 years ago but today the house stands unchanged and still impressively beautiful.

the uneventfulness of our lives we dearly loved our home, our parents and all the workpeople living in the cottages and farms of the Merthyr Mawr and Ogmore villages," Miss Nicholl told me when I visited her at her home.

"Our grandmother (John Cole Nicholl's widow) lived in the village and we went for walks with her every day," said Miss Nicholl. "She would tell us fascinating tales of the ferocious beasts of Africa and Asia. We knew each tale by heart but such was her telling that we never wearied of hearing them over and over again."

Miss Nicholl recalled her father's attitude to money with a story concerning the proposed building of a harbour at the mouth of the River Ogmore and the laying of a railway beside it for the export of coal.

we sat on the other," Miss Nicholl recalled. "In actual fact we knew the servants far better than we knew our parents."

"Our upbringing was very austere and disciplined. There was no heating in the house except for open fires and light was provided by lamps and candles."

"Our bedrooms were unheated and I suffered terribly with chilblains but it would never have occurred to us to complain about anything."

"We practically never quarrelled and I can never remember crying in my life. We were brought up to behave like the children of a gentleman and always to be a good example."

"Living at Merthyr Mawr in those days was like living in a world apart. Our lives were really very monotonous but we all loved the house, we loved the grounds, we loved the woods and we cared very much for everybody in the village. They were part of our lives and we were part of theirs and my father was like a father to them."

Miss Nicholl was eight years of age when the Boer War began and a call for mounted regiments brought forth the Glamorgan Yeomanry.

When the first World War broke out in 1914 the Yeomanry was ordered to guard the Norfolk coast under the command of Miss Nicholl's father.

Meanwhile her elder brother, John, joined the 2nd Welch Regiment and was killed in action in October — just four months after the outbreak of war. He was 22 years of age.

Miss Nicholl's father died in 1935 and his younger son Robert who had married Miss Helen Fuller from Sussex, succeeded to the estate.

Educated at Eton and briefly at Oxford, Robert owned a garage in Surbiton, Surrey, and ran a team of racing Lagondas. He also owned a number of cargo boats before the war.

Convalescent

He moved into Merthyr Mawr House with his wife and infant daughters, Jennifer and Diana four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. During the whole period of the war Merthyr Mawr House became a convalescent home

for members of the armed forces.

Thousands and thousands of men convalesced there during the six years the war lasted, while Robert and his family lived in a sectioned-off part of the first floor of the house. The nursing staff took over the attics.

In 1947 hopes of a male heir were shattered with the birth of a third daughter to Mr. and Mrs. Nicholl... and so the line of Nicholl sons inheriting the estate was broken.

"My father was the most kind and loving of fathers and never by so much as a hint did he ever express any disappointment he might have felt at not having a son," Mrs. Jennifer McLaggan — the eldest of his daughters and the present owner of Merthyr Mawr — told me.

And what is Merthyr Mawr House like today... it hasn't changed physically in the last 100 years or so thought the life-style of the occupants obviously has.

Mrs. McLaggan, her husband, Murray, who at one time taught law at Oxford, and who now looks after the estate and farms at Llampha, near Ewenny, live on the first floor of the house.

The large rooms on the ground-floor are only used when functions for charity are held at the house.

The old kitchen downstairs has been abandoned and a pleasant labour-saving kitchen has been installed upstairs where the McLaggans entertain their friends to supper sometimes.

The house is filled with thousands of priceless, leather-bound books, portraits of Nicholls, alive and dead, look down from the walls and the noise of children is no longer confined to the spacious nursery overlooking the rolling fields to the river.

The eldest of the McLaggan children John is 15-years-old and is being educated at Winchester. Brother Rory, who is 12 attends preparatory school near Salisbury and nine-year-old Iona is a pupil at St. Clare's Convent School, Porthcawl.

Two budgies, two parakeets and a parrot take up one corner of the cosy kitchen at Merthyr Mawr, two large dogs and a cat are also resident in one of Glamorgan's stateliest of homes and the latest addition to the family are two goats bought to help "mow the grass."