



Picturesque renaissance

*Bryngwyn Hall, Powys
The Home of Auriol, Marchioness of Linlithgow*

Mothballed for half a century, this beautiful Georgian house has been triumphantly brought back to life. Jeremy Musson relishes this story of a courageous restoration

Photographs by Paul Barker

BRYNGWYN Hall is a remarkable house. It is remarkable not only for its enviable position in a dramatic, well-wooded landscape (*Fig 1*), but also for the story of its late-20th-century revival. Having been shut up and its contents mothballed in 1928, it was not until 1985 that this sleeping beauty was imaginatively reawakened by Auriol, Marchioness of Linlithgow (then Lady Ropner), whose family had first bought this estate in 1813.

The square, red-brick house, with its tall sash windows, today presents a trim, confident, even sprightly late-Georgian appearance. The triangular pediment over the entrance front (*Fig 2*) is a modern addition, designed by Donald Buttress, who was the architect of the late-1980s work. It marked the triumphant conclusion of the restoration and also harked back to the pediment of the original late-18th-century house, and to an unrealised design for one considered during the rebuilding of the house in Regency times.

Perched on a hill, the house is enfolded in well-wooded parkland, rich in mature trees. The hill itself is skirted by a large manmade lake, the tall trees giving way to views and glimpses of other wooded hills and mountains beyond. It is difficult today to believe that this attractively scaled house was ever closed up, but, in 1928, the estate was weighed down under pressure of heavy death duties, which saw so many houses pulled down.

This was one of three estates inherited by Lady Linlithgow's mother in 1928, and drastic economies had to be made in the 1930s. After that, the main house at Bryngwyn was really used only during the war, for evacuees, the Territorial Army and the Anti-Aircraft regiment, and then finally boarded up. Photographs of the house taken just before the restoration show a forlorn building, the interiors still stacked with dust-laden crates containing furniture, books, family papers and paintings, including many things supplied to the family when it extended the house in 1813.

The roof needed major works and part of the service wing had been pulled down in the 1960s, but otherwise, the restoration project focused on returning the house to its late-Georgian character, replacing the windows with large and characteristic sashes (which survived in places) and removing an incongruous porch that had been added in 1914.

Bryngwyn Hall has two principal building periods. The first was a small villa of 1774, designed by architect Robert Mylne, for the Mostyn Owen family, who had owned the land from the 1630s. He visited Bryngwyn first in 1773, and the new house was built in 1773–74.

The house that Mylne constructed was of the compact villa type that was familiar in the Palladian-inspired work of Sir Robert Taylor in his houses around London, and



← *Fig 1 facing page:* Bryngwyn Hall sits in fine parkland that was mostly laid out in the early 1800s. ↑ *Fig 2 above:* The entrance front: the pediment was added in the 1980s

that had also begun to catch the imagination of landowners. Mylne was popular with Shropshire landowners, and worked at Attingham and nearby Loton Park.

The 1813 survey plans, still in the house, suggest the 1774 Bryngwyn consisted of an entrance hall with staircase, and two larger rooms either side running the full depth of the house, and a smaller sitting room, with a canted bay, still the central feature of this front, giving views across the valley behind. A watercolour by Thomas Ingleby of the house suggests some of the service quarters have been at least partly in a free-standing building, and some in the basement.

The house was damaged by a fire in 1793, and the Mostyn-Owens decided to concentrate on their estate at Woodhouse. The house was repaired by J. H. Haycock and sold, in 1805, to the Gill family. The second major building phase, which brought the house to its present extent, was commissioned by

Martin Williams, from a long-established Jamaican planter family, which could trace descent from Carmarthenshire landowners.

George Williams, a late-17th-century ancestor of Auriol Linlithgow's family was married to a sister of Peter Beckford, the richest man in Jamaica. The Williams family built up big estates there, at Seven Rivers and Old Hope, and married into other important families there, including the Waytes and the Barretts. Such was the descent of Martin Williams, who bought the Bryngwyn estates from the Mostyn-Owens.

Williams was a man of some means and was brought up to enjoy the life of a landed gentleman. Educated at Eton and Oxford, he had been a captain in the Hussars. In 1811, he married Mary Madocks, whose family connections were in Denbighshire—her uncle, William Alexander, was the great entrepreneur who built Tremadoc and Portmadoc.

The Williamses engaged Thomas Jones ➤



The central staircase

The top-lit staircase at Bryngwyn Hall lies at the core of the house, and works as a central feature of the main reception rooms. The staircase was probably part of the works that transformed the compact Palladian villa built for the Mostyn-Owen family by Robert Mylne. In 1813, the house was remodelled in a neo-Classical spirit by architect Thomas Jones—although some of his more ambitious proposals for a portico and colonnade were not executed. Family china is displayed in an exhibition case and family portraits hang on the landing. The sculpture of the huntsman came from the Sandbach-Mackeson's other seat at Hafodunos in North Wales.



↑ Fig 3: The elegant dining room is part of the 1813 additions, and was once the library. Tall windows celebrate the landscape around

to extend their house in a more neo-Classical spirit, reminiscent of the work of Nash and James Wyatt. Architectural drawings and plans signed by Jones were identified in the house's archive by Henry Potts, and are now framed and hanging in the hall and corridor. These show how the house was doubled in depth, with a new entrance hall, top-lit central staircase, business room and drawing room.

The 1813 works also included a substantial two-storey service wing, with everything

required to make Bryngwyn a comfortable gentleman's residence. The architectural drawings show the buildings rendered. This has not been recently renewed, however, and, today, the red bricks of the walls are visible.

Among the designs are versions of a possible Doric portico under a pediment, as well as a single-storey Doric colonnade unifying the two main rooms overlooking the lake. It seems that these elements were never executed, and the early-19th-century house

had a more austere parapet at roof level, typical of the neo-Classical taste of the time.

The polished marble chimneypieces in the present dining room (Fig 3) and kitchen (originally library and dining room respectively) speak of this same neo-Classical taste, with paired columns of the Doric and Tuscan order, reflected in some of the original Regency furniture. There are bills relating to silver, from a Thomas Whipham, Goldsmiths of London, principally for the

dining table and buffet display, and almost everything to be engraved with the Williams crest—one 1812 bill is for £1,034.

Williams also spent prodigiously on books, and many volumes in the house reveal his name inscribed within. One offers a clue as to the attractions of Bryngwyn: a copy of Uvedale Price's *Essays on the Picturesque as compared with the Sublime and the beautiful and on the use of studying pictures for the purposes of improving real landscape* (to give it its full title), published in 1798, and marked with Williams's name and initial on the title page.

Price and his cousin Payne Knight were two Herefordshire landowners who championed the pleasures of landscape improvement in this artistic fashion, exulting in the drama of nature, and enhancing it by plantations of trees, walks and vistas, of which the best-known Welsh example would be the work by Thomas Johnes at Hafod.

An 1839 survey of the estate at Bryngwyn shows just how densely it had been planted, an effect that can still be appreciated today, as one walks through light-filled rooms, conscious at every window of the attractions of the landscape outside. That the taste for landscape improvement was shared by Williams's wife is evidenced by a letter written by her uncle, who visited the house and estate, and wrote warmly to his niece of the Picturesque possibilities of the land, and of her artistic eye. He thought they would be very happy there.

Williams had four daughters. The youngest, Elizabeth, married Henry Sandbach, from a family of Liverpool merchants with an estate at Hafodunos, North Wales, where they built a huge Gothic Revival house designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott. Bryngwyn was left to their third daughter, Katherine, who had intended to leave the estates at Bryngwyn and Old Hope, Jamaica, to Martin Sandbach, a younger son of her Sandbach sister.

Martin Sandbach (whose portrait hangs in the entrance hall) died lion-hunting in Somaliland, and so, in 1895, the Bryngwyn estate passed to Arthur, his youngest brother. A major-general in the Royal Engineers, he had married the Hon Ina Douglas-Pennant, a daughter of Lord Penrhyn of Penrhyn Castle. They made their principal home at Bryngwyn Hall, and extended the garden through the park right down to the lake, and, in 1914, added a curiously discordant porch to designs by A. M. Hogg.

The general, who had served in India, Afghanistan, and Africa, became a considerable collector of artefacts, from ancient Egyptian pieces, to contemporary and antique weaponry from Burma and India, which are now all displayed in the new billiard room, created out of the former servants' quarters. In effect, it is also a family museum room.

A letter in the archives from a fellow



↑ Fig 4 above: The drawing room opens up to the library, as part of a typically Regency suite of entertaining rooms, lit by tall windows. ↓ Fig 5 below: Lady Linlithgow, once the representative of Sotheby's in Wales, is a collector of modern Welsh paintings



officer, Youngusband, writing from Tibet in 1904, suggests that he bought additional things avidly: 'All right old chap, you shall have some of the stuff I am bringing back from here and I will give you a certificate with it that it was paid for & not looted.'

His elder brother, Samuel, died in 1928, and the general inherited the estate at Hafodunos. Sadly, he died six months later, leaving his young daughter with the problems of double death duties, so the house at Bryngwyn was closed up and its contents mothballed. His daughter, Geraldine, married Lawrie Mackeson in 1932, and the family name became Mackeson-Sandbach. In 1934, they sold the mansion house at Hafodunos, and, in 1938, also sold the Old Hope estate in Jamaica. They lived in a farmhouse on the Hafodunos estate and kept a cottage at Bryngwyn.

Lady Linlithgow's triumphant revival

included the rediscovery and restoration (by Winston James and Katerina Beasley) of all the furniture that remained in the house, much of which was original to the Williams period. A large family kitchen-breakfast room was created in the former dining room, which is hung with Lady Linlithgow's collection of modern Welsh art (Fig 5), including paintings by Kyffin Williams and John Napper. The former library was also converted into the dining room, and its bookshelves were retained. It opens up in the classic Regency fashion into the drawing room (Fig 4), effectively creating a large long room, lit by tall windows on three sides.

Bryngwyn Hall has all the admired qualities of a late-Georgian country house, furnished with elegance and intelligence by Lady Linlithgow, a fine-arts consultant—for many years, she was the Welsh representative for Sotheby's. The house is still a much-loved family home, accommodating shooting and house parties with comfort, and is also now used to host weddings. In all of this, Lady Linlithgow is famously supported by her housekeeper, Christine Horton, who helped get the house up and running in the late 1980s, and still plays a key role in its management.

As we know from Thomas Lloyd's chilling volume *Lost Houses of Wales* (1986), the smaller country houses of Wales were particularly vulnerable to being sold off from their estates, or demolished, in the early and mid 20th century. Bryngwyn Hall is a model of the tenacity of an owner determined to see it and its inherited collections pass on to another generation. ↗

For information about weddings and events, visit www.bryngwyn.com

