

PENLLERGARE:

**AN APPRECIATION OF THE PLACE,
PEOPLE AND CONTEXT**

**A SYNOPSIS OF THE REPORT
PREPARED BY JEFF CHILDS FOR THE PENLLERGARE TRUST**

March 2004

NOTE

This synopsis comprises the abridged Preface and Statements of Significance (which concluded each section), together with the General Conclusions of the Report, which . in two volumes . is available for public reference in the West Glamorgan Archive Service, County Hall, Swansea: Reference [GB216] D/D PT.

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PREFACE

This work has been commissioned by the Penllergare Trust, in furtherance of its primary objectives to protect, conserve, restore and maintain the cultural landscape of Penllergare for public benefit.

It sets out to examine a remarkable estate which has to all intents and purposes been forgotten by contemporaries, in some respects scandalously so. Penllergare has been described as a secret and magic place (John Brown and Company, *Landskip and Prospect*, p. 12) but this epithet scarcely does justice to what, in past times, was testimony to spirited improvement on a grand, indeed exceptional, scale as well as the creativity, innovation, energy and ambition of its owners. Any study of Penllergare invariably focuses on the series of dramatic physical changes initiated by the Dillwyn Llewelyn family primarily from the fourth decade of the nineteenth century although, again, such an emphasis underplays the overall longevity and significance of the estate whose origins go back much earlier.

At its zenith, the Penllergare estate was an outstanding example of a picturesque, romantic landscape created for the enjoyment of its owners. Its creator . or, perhaps more properly, its re-inventor . was John Dillwyn Llewelyn, a man distinguished not only for his contribution to landscape design and horticulture, but also for his scientific experiments and pioneering photography. John inherited to the full the intellectual traits of his father, the ubiquitous Lewis Weston Dillwyn, and like the latter was to achieve national, if not, international significance for his endeavours.

Penllergare is registered at Grade II by Cadw, who views the endeavours of John Dillwyn Llewelyn as one of the primary reasons for awarding such a grading: "The partial survival of a very important picturesque and Romantic landscape of the mid-nineteenth century (was) the creation of John Dillwyn Llewelyn, a nationally important figure in horticulture. The site is unusual in that there are numerous

contemporary photographs of it, taken by Llewelyn, who was also a pioneer of photography. Although much of his exotic planting has gone the structure of his landscaping remains, as do the ruins of his pioneering orchideous house in the walled kitchen garden(Cadw, p. 8).

That Penllergare was to provide inspiration for the expression of all John's talents is abundantly clear. For, as has been written, "Such landscapes were not simply a matter of planting trees and flowering plants; their layouts embodied philosophical and aesthetic principles and their realisation demanded exotic plants. They embodied a studied informality, a variety of content, a succession of viewpoints, and changes of gradient with surprises around every corner. Penllergare was an outstanding example of this kind of garden"(Donald Moore in Morris, Victorian Paradise, p. xiii). With these concepts and ambitions in mind John exploited the contours and majestic natural beauty of the site in the implementation of his grand design to create an idyllic landscape in the Picturesque style, which he stocked with a rich variety of trees and shrubs as well as native and exotic plants. Features, utilitarian and ornamental, were included but there was more. John erected one of the country's first purpose-built orchid houses within the grounds, an observatory was constructed close to the mansion house and experiments with an electrically-powered boat (constructed by John himself from the prototype motor developed by Benjamin Hill) were conducted on the Upper Lake.

Cadw has described this "type of site"as equating to "A large-scale picturesque layout of formerly wooded park and grounds, including lakes and an artificial waterfall. Large walled kitchen garden which includes the ruins of a pioneering orchideous house"(Cadw, p. 8). Indeed, with its lakes and waterfalls, panoramic vistas and secret places, not to mention its horticultural and botanical riches, Penllergare attracted many distinguished visitors. Among those with scientific interests were Sir Charles Wheatstone, the distinguished physicist, with whom John and his father conducted experiments on electrical underwater telegraphy; Charles Babbage, the inventor of the computer; Michael Faraday, the discoverer of electromagnetic induction; Sir Humphrey Davy, the inventor of the miner's safety lamp and Henry Fox Talbot, widely acknowledged as the founding father of photography, who was a cousin of John's wife, Emma.

Inspired by Talbot's early photographic experiments Llewelyn became an enthusiastic and accomplished practitioner in this field. Penllergare provided an infinite variety of subjects for his camera and his superb photographic images vividly evoke the past glories of what has been termed a "Victorian Paradise" His son, John Talbot Dillwyn Llewelyn, followed in his footsteps by substantially enhancing the horticultural value of the estate, particularly the gardens which were noted for their rhododendrons and azaleas said to be unrivalled in the United Kingdom.

During the first half of the twentieth century these glories began to fade, with the vicissitudes of war, death and varied occupancy conspiring to initiate a savage decline. Since the Second World War Penllergare has borne the impact of further development, insidious ingression, neglect and vandalism. The mansion, once an intellectual powerhouse of the first order and in many respects the south Wales equivalent of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, was demolished and left as unsightly rubble for almost twenty years until it was replaced by a civic centre. Modern housing has encroached within feet of the walled gardens (one of Penllergare's many treasures) and is proving an ever-present and invasive threat to the neighbouring parkland, whilst the woodland valley gardens are derelict and unwelcoming, having been top-sliced by the M4 motorway.

In the early 1990s the planners in the local authority made an agreement with private developers whereby Penllergare would become a water and country park. The *quid pro quo* was that permission would be granted to build houses and commercial facilities on the fringes of the estate. Unfortunately the public's share of the planning gain has signally failed to materialise and lacking proper maintenance such works as were undertaken by the developer have caused more damage than the natural processes of decay.

Miraculously, however, many of the structural features and planting at Penllergare still survive and precisely because of its neglect and inaccessibility Penllergare has become a wildlife domain of increasing importance and bio-diversity, some of whose species and habitats are rare. Another striking feature is that despite its proximity to the city centre, and being surrounded by development, there is a remarkable sense of quiet seclusion here. Indeed, it can be said that Penllergare comprises the remnants of one of the finest picturesque and romantic parks and gardens in Wales.

The work comprises two volumes. Volume 1 is a general, narrative account of the estate's development and the families who were associated with it. Volume 2 provides supplementary material, primarily in the form of illustrations, imagery, cartography and extracts from key written sources. Volume 1 is further structured into 8 sections. The first section describes the nature, scope and ambit of the assignment. Concepts and visions are then explored and the opportunity is also taken in this preliminary stage to consider the toponomical debate that has long simmered over nomenclature, that is, whether the proper spelling should be *Penllergare* or *Penllergaer*. The second section gives a description of the families associated with Penllergare throughout the ages, including the inter-connections with other established families. In the third section, the origins and growth of the estate in

the parish of Llangyfelach are charted in some detail with less emphasis given to the wider estate in Glamorgan, Carmarthenshire and Breconshire. The decline of the estate in the locality concludes this

section. In section four emphasis is given to the demesne, particularly from geological, topographical and ecological viewpoints. The improvements commissioned by John Dillwyn Llewelyn are then described, along with key tangible features notably the drive, the lodges, the lakes, the mansion and the gardens. Under the heading of Intellectual Achievements the fifth section explores the many botanical, horticultural, astronomical, photographic, artistic and scientific accomplishments the estate's families are synonymous with. The sixth section considers the often overlooked industrial developments that were undertaken on the estate, particularly the exploitation of coal. In the seventh section, the civic and ecclesiastical initiatives associated with the estate are given prominence. The eighth and concluding section brings the story virtually up-to-date by giving an appraisal of the estate's recent history ending with a reaffirmation of the estate's significance and why it should be rehabilitated and restored. It purposely stops short of assessing the implications arising from very recent planning developments as these aspects are outwith the ambit of this study.

Three appendices conclude Volume 1. Appendix 1 briefly describes the farms that lay within the vicinity of the demesne, comprising what can be termed the immediate estate. Appendix 2 collates the statements of significance that conclude most sections and sub-sections of the account whilst Appendix 3 posits general conclusions.

While the present work reflects the considerable body of knowledge and research already accumulated (to March 2004) it is the intention of the Trust to incorporate relevant new material as it becomes available.

Author's note

To avoid constant repetition of the well-known players who feature prominently in this work, namely, Lewis Weston Dillwyn, John Dillwyn Llewelyn, Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn and Sir John Talbot Dillwyn Llewelyn the following abbreviations have been respectively used - LWD, JDL, LLD and JTDL.

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STATEMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Prices

The Prices of Penllergare were a significant and socially prominent west Glamorgan family long before the Llewelyns acquired the estate. They were of gentry status albeit of a secondary nature in Philip Jenkins's typology. Increasingly, members of the family became cultured and metropolitan in outlook.

The origin, evolution and growth of the estate was synonymous with this family which provided a firm platform for the Llewelyn and Dillwyn Llewelyn families to build upon and enhance.

The importance of the estate should be viewed through a pre-Llewelyn lens and a holistic approach adopted regarding the estate's history and significance.

The Mathews

The Mathews family was another powerful local family. They were contemporaneous with the Prices with whom they inter-married and were consequently inter-related. One member of the family, Marmaduke Mathews, was a progenitor of Puritanism in south Wales and internationally renowned, notably in America. When the heiress of the Nydfwch estate, Jane Mathews, married Gryffydd Price in 1750 it increased the Penllergare estate by some 1000 acres.

Nydfwch may have been the older of the two houses. Although the Nydfwch mansion was demolished in the 1820s its site is known and in need of an archaeological survey and excavation.

The Llewelyns

Like the Prices, with whom they inter-married on several occasions, the Llewelyns were a powerful family in west Glamorgan. The Ynysygerwn estate had been in their ownership almost as long as Penllergare had been in the care of the Prices. They were of gentry status and appear in Blome's *Britannia* of 1673. They had a strong tradition of office-holding and increasingly became involved in industrial activities.

The fusion of the Ynysygerwn and Penllergare estates in 1787 created one of the largest landholding entities outside those owned by the Leviathans.

The Dillwyns

The Dillwyns had a long, respectable pedigree. They were of solid Quaker and philanthropic stock and possessed financial and business acumen.

Lewis Weston Dillwyn

Lewis Weston Dillwyn was a polymath and intellectual giant and of local, national and international renown. He was an upwardly mobile industrialist who made a seamless transition to

country gentleman and who was responsible for the great growth of the Penllergare estate. He was of impeccable dissenting tradition which lent itself to a high degree of creativity, innovation and achievement; a man of influence whose personality and attributes were symbolic of Swansea's Victorian development.

John Dillwyn Llewelyn

John Dillwyn Llewelyn was a polymath of distinction, a pioneering photographer, astronomer and an unrivalled horticulturalist; creative and innovative particularly in estate design. He was a great public benefactor and a champion of liberal causes.

His wife, Emma Thomasina, and daughter, Thereza, were creative influences and solid sources of support.

John Talbot Dillwyn Llewelyn

John Talbot Dillwyn Llewelyn maintained the horticultural and cultural traditions of Penllergare. He was a Vice-President of the Royal Horticultural Society and it was under him that Penllergare reached its zenith in terms of horticulture.

He assumed many prestigious political positions, locally and nationally and is often acclaimed as the founding father of cricket in south Wales.

He was instrumental in overseeing the rural transformation of the community to a more urban entity and enjoyed universal popularity in the district. JTDL was the last of the Penllergare squire

Interconnections with other landed families

There was a strong cross-current of intermarriage between the Penllergare families and other landed gentry. Such events highlighted the strong social and cultural networks and bonds that existed, led incrementally and cumulatively to estate aggregation and consolidation as well as increasing the socio-economic and political power bases of the Penllergare families. In addition they facilitated greater opportunities for creativity, innovation, cross-fertilization of ideas and estate diversification.

The Estate

The estate has a longevity almost second to none in Glamorgan and it witnessed consistent, well planned, dynamic and diversified growth throughout its history. Its growth was essentially organic and incremental coupled with periodic bouts of aggrandisement

It successfully overcame the problems of estate transmission arising from inheritance, direct descent and lack of heirs for most of its history and was a classic example of an estate which

made a successful transition from being firmly anchored to agriculture to one more underpinned by industry and commerce.

It survives as a viable entity albeit without the pivotal components of the demolished mansion and ancillary buildings and in spite of the all-pervasive threats presented by modern development. The essential core of the estate remains remarkably intact.

Geology

Penllergare's geology and physical environment profoundly influenced the local agricultural economy as well as the settlement patterns and nature of landholding. The Pennant Sandstone and Upper Coal Series of rock strata led to the exploitation of coal, the industrial diversification of the estate and increased mineral wealth.

Mineral exploitation led to pronounced landscape changes both on the estate and the wider area, in terms of industrial and urban development.

Topography

The diverse topographical nature of the estate and its natural contours, facilitated the wholesale re-planning, re-designing and re-configuration of the estate in the 1830s. The naturally well-wooded, steep-sided, south-facing river valley, provided an ideal habitat for exotic plantings.

The low-lying and hidden nature of much of the demesne (allied with its designation as a Green Wedge) has to some extent protected it from further desecration and suburban sprawl.

Ecology

Penllergare possesses a rich and varied eco-system. The natural ecology of the demesne has been markedly influenced by human activity followed by decades of neglect. Much of the ecology is captured in the photographs or watercolours of the Dillwyn Llewelyn family.

The eco-system offers educational and conservation potential.

Estate Improvements

The improvements were transformatory, creative and novel particularly as regards the melding of beauty and utility that characterised the designed management of the landscape.

The physical changes complemented the intellectual achievements of the family, resulted in the greater visibility of the estate, literally and metaphorically and therefore contributed to enhancing the status of the estate and its members, attracting visitors of national renown.

Penllergare is a superb example of a genre known as the picturesque style, particularly as developed in Wales as its contribution to European landscape art.

The Drive

Together with the substantial and coordinated reworking of the mansion, gardens and park, the building of the new drive, with its carefully engineered views out, and glimpses of dramatic artificial and natural landscape features, was designed to demonstrate JDL's status and influence. The drive represented a huge capital project which transformed accessibility; it contributed to the dynamism, sustainability and longevity of the estate, as well as allowing speedier access through the demesne.

The Lodges

The lodges allowed effective supervision and maintenance of the demesne and parkland. Most, if not all, the lodges were strategically placed and formed part of the grand design. Several survive, albeit much altered, which allow architectural and stylistic comparisons over time.

The Quarry

The quarry was a vital source of stone for the programme of estate improvements including the construction of both waterfalls.

The quarry, together with its setting was contrived to form an important component of the designed landscape in the picturesque style and was an important garden feature in its own right. It is an important ecological site today.

The Lakes

The two lakes demonstrate perfectly the imperative of the period on the part of the gentry to balance the beauty and utility in landscape design and management. They were prominent ornamental features of the demesne which enhanced its aesthetic appearance, diversification and recreational value.

The Upper Lake or Fishpond was the setting for some of the most atmospheric settings of JDL's photography and also the scene of the earliest electric boat propulsion experiments anywhere in the world.

Despite the partial destruction of the developing eco-system resulting from the drainage of JDL's magnificent Lower Lake, and the intrusion of the newly constructed token lake, the site retains significant value as a natural habitat and to a limited extent echoes the original landscape design.

The Waterfalls

The waterfalls were successful feats of human engineering the focus being on utility and beauty. Their design and construction were sophisticated and effective. The one associated with the Upper Lake is one of Penllergare's gems whose appearance remains virtually unchanged from its Victorian heyday.

The Old Bridge

The Old Bridge was of some antiquity and probably of late medieval origin and so its probable date of construction parallels the origin of the Penllergare estate.

It probably served as a strategic crossing point connecting Gelly Evan farm (and possibly Gellyhallt) with the main estate and also probably had a significant connection with the old mill.

The structure provided an aesthetically pleasing object for the photographer and artist. Because of its proximity to the upper falls and its pivotal function in the path network it is worthy of rebuilding in a manner reflecting its historical importance and construction.

The Railway

It adds an enigmatic ingredient to the Penllergare story and could provide an industrial archaeological dimension to the demesne.

The Mansion

The mansion was the fulcrum of the demesne. It had a long, distinguished history and was an intellectual powerhouse, a centre of excellence and applied learning.

The Observatory

The structure is testimony to JDL's many interests and Penllergare's fame. One of the first photographs of the moon was taken from the observatory.

The observatory is one of the few tangible, bricks and mortar reminders of the Llewelyn era and is of architectural and industrial archaeological merit deserving of conservation and practical use.

Penllergare Home Farm

The Home Farm formed an integral part of the demesne and was a source of provision and supply for the mansion and its inhabitants. Its existence, together with the size of the farmstead and number of outbuildings reflected the importance of the great estate it served.

The Gardens and Orchid House

The various gardens were the centrepiece and very essence of Penllergare as a Victorian Paradise. Their number, range and diversity were of the first order and unrivalled in south Wales in terms of their variety particularly for the cultivation of rhododendrons. The orchid house was unique and the large-scale cultivation of orchids was also unrivalled.

The inimitable quality of all these features further enhanced the reputation of the estate as a whole and as a centre of excellence. Enough of the gardens remain for them to be rehabilitated and the splendour recreated.

Botany, Horticulture and Natural History

The polymathic knowledge of LWD, JDL and JTDL is self-evident. The respective contributions made by successive generations of the family were often pioneering. There was also a happy medium between the intellectual and utilitarian. Much of the knowledge, learning and publishing were directly transferable and practicable which led to the improvement and betterment of the estate.

Photography

JDL's foremost contribution to, and his place in, the annals of early photography is acknowledged and well documented and underlines the exceptional role Penllergare played in the development of the genre.

The voluminous photographic archive is an essential source and will be of inestimable value in the restoration or rehabilitation of the estate.

Astronomy

Within a local and regional context Penllergare's contribution to astronomy can be viewed as significant. The inter-connections between photography and astronomy allowed some pioneering projects to be undertaken.

Art

The watercolours have their own intrinsic value and represent almost a unique source for depicting Penllergare and serve to highlight the artistic and intellectual endeavours of lesser known members of the family.

Science

The experiments with electric boat propulsion demonstrated the family's innovative spirit. The estate's reputation for scientific learning and innovation was clearly significant to attract the elite from the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Coal

Coal was a valuable economic resource and mined by most of the great families associated with Penllergare. Penllergare was in the forefront of coal production and investment in the pre-

Llewelyn era, Gryffydd Price being one of the last local landowners to work his own coal directly, following the tradition set by his seventeenth century ancestors.

The ownership or possession of coal brought power and wealth but could lead to conflict. However it was relatively easy to exploit, provided a prime source of income for landowners allowing non-dependence on agriculture and facilitated estate diversification.

Pottery and Porcelain

The Cambrian was the foremost Swansea pottery. It provided LWD with a profitable business concern which underpinned his wealth before taking over responsibility for Penllergare, it allowed him to sharpen his business and entrepreneurial acumen and provided a steady source of investment. It also provided a form of tangible wealth which he was able to bequeath to his second son.

Swansea porcelain, produced at the Swansea China Works, was renowned and sought after particularly in a local and regional context

Porcelain manufacture and its designs linked strongly with LWD's passion for natural history.

Zinc and Silver

The zinc and silver smelting works were a source of important income overall. Their longevity as a family concern was unusual and are another example of the Dillwyns' wide business interests.

The works provided an important source of employment for the locality in a highly competitive market.

The recovery of the zinc works by Amy Dillwyn was perhaps the greatest of many achievements by this remarkable woman.

Parc Llewelyn

Parc Llewelyn was a vividly tangible expression of JDL's munificence and philanthropy the donation being illustrative of JDL's deeply held Christian beliefs and assured his place in the ranks of champions of open spaces.

The gesture achieved its therapeutic objective of creating a green oasis, with attendant health and recreational benefits, for the local populace living in a densely populated neighbourhood.

Despite the vastly changed demographic circumstances of the area, the park is still cherished and used by people living nearby.

St David's Church, Penllergaer

The church was the ecclesiastical fulcrum around which the religious life of the village community revolved. It was exclusively a Dillwyn Llewelyn creation whose positive influence has been consistent and pervasive.

It underlined the beneficence of JDL and particularly JTDL and provided social solidarity and communitarianism particularly in its social activities.

The Growth of Penllergaer

The growth of Penllergaer was primarily the result of socio-economic developments in Gorseinon. The Dillwyn Llewelyn family nevertheless fully participated in the development of Penllergaer and helped make it a vibrant community. The legacy of the Dillwyn Llewelyn family remains omnipresent in the community in terms of the built heritage, street names, new housing developments and folklore.

Recent History

The importance of the site is signified by the plethora of planning applications and appeals since 1972. The site is clearly a highly valued one which has led to a frenzy of competition from various parties albeit within the constraints of planning policies. The steady encroachment of housing development has already had a marked erosion of part of the historic core estate.

The continuing neglect and decline of the estate makes it imperative that remedial and restorative action is taken immediately so that most of the historic demesne can be rescued.

The Immediate Estate

The farms and other holdings were in most cases contiguous with the demesne which added strength and visibility to the latter. They have been the building blocks of the estate over time and have provided a vital source of revenue (i.e. rents) to the demesne. They also provided the estate with a relatively large amount of revenue when it was economic for parts of the estate to be sold off for industrial, business or residential development. Several of the farms overlay rich mineral deposits which were exploited.

The incorporation of Nydfwch by Penllergaer was of prime significance in aggregating and strengthening the latter, affording the opportunities for revamping and extending the demesne and for initiating access from the south.

Several of the lands have been leased to other organisations which again brought in revenue but has also resulted in dramatic landscape changes.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Penllergare comprises the remnants (about 120 hectares; 297 acres in area) of one of the finest picturesque and romantic parks and gardens in Wales. It is registered at Grade II by Cadw.

The site is unusual, perhaps even unique, in that numerous contemporary photographs of it survive, taken in the pioneering days of photography.

Despite its dereliction, proximity to Swansea city centre and surrounding development there is a sense at Penllergare of seclusion and calm.

In its heyday local people were encouraged to visit the gardens and enjoy Penllergare's quiet beauty and magnificent plantings but, because of failures of planning agreements, the promised country park has failed to materialise. Even so, Penllergare is still cherished by local people, hopeful of its revival.

Penllergare and its setting are becoming increasingly important for their bio-diversity, species and habitats, some of which are rare.

Penllergare has not undergone significant change since its creation on a virtually virgin site more than 150 years ago. Thus, it is a rare form of time capsule worthy of conservation at the very least.

Although the mansion and two of the lodges have been destroyed, the layout survives in a nearly complete state (with the exception of recent changes affecting the Lower Lake). The remaining elements of the layout perpetuate the structure and atmosphere of the landscape with the special qualities of seclusion, surprise and charm persisting and ready to be expressed more fully after restoration

No other south or mid-Wales designed landscape (with the exception of Hafod and Piercefield) exploits the dramatic quality of the natural landform so well

No other Welsh landscape and probably very few in the world, has such an extensive archive of early photography of outstanding quality containing detailed information of the layout within 10 or 20 years of its creation, which enable it to be restored to an exceptionally high level of historical authenticity.

The encroachment of twentieth-century urbanisation and road building to the boundaries of the estate make the survival of Penllergare the more remarkable; it is a secret and magic place.

