

THE HISTORIC BUILDINGS COUNCIL FOR WALES— THE FIRST ELEVEN YEARS

By The Marquess of Anglesey

BY the middle of this century there were left few owners of outstanding historic buildings with means adequate for their maintenance. In recognition of this fact, Parliament passed the 1953 Historic Buildings Act. Its object, in effect, was to return to such owners part of the taxes they pay, for the specific purpose of helping them to put their houses into a good state of repair. It was thus acknowledged that the best way of preserving this important part of the national heritage, was to assist those whose personal interest it was to do so.

The Act came late; but not disastrously so. The appalling state of affairs whereby numerous buildings of major importance in Britain were demolished every year, was put an end to. The funds made available were, and are, insufficient for more than a proportion of the needs, but it is clear that from now on no really first-class specimen need fall into the hands of the house-breakers.

Wales is a small country, and until recently was relatively poor. Though she is exceptionally rich in Ancient Monuments, particularly in Burial Chambers and Edwardian Castles, the great waves of private building which swept over England in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and especially the eighteenth centuries largely passed her by. She has nothing to compare with the Burghleys, Longleats, Knowles, Kedleston and Wiltons. Nor has she an abundance of comparatively unspoiled towns and villages, such as Ludlow, Broadway and Cerne Abbas. Tenby, Montgomery and Beaumaris, though not to be despised, hardly begin to compete.

There are, nevertheless, a number of historic buildings, the likes of which, reflecting as they do a history and culture peculiar to Wales, are not to be found anywhere else. Two examples

which come to mind are *Y Gangell* which is in Carmarthenshire and *Capel Newydd*, Nanhoron, in Caernarvonshire. *Y Gangell* was the birthplace of the eminent Welsh preacher and hymn-writer, the Reverend Elfet Lewis, better known by his bardic name of Elfed. With the help of a grant, a committee of local residents has preserved this humble cottage as a permanent place of pilgrimage. *Capel Newydd* is a very early Congregational chapel erected in about 1765, which survives as originally built, with much of its original furniture and fittings.

These two examples well illustrate the Council's most perplexing problem. The words of the Act place upon it the duty of advising the Minister of Public Buildings and Works

"on the making of grants towards the repair or maintenance of buildings of outstanding historic or architectural interest or their contents or adjoining land".

The difficulty is to decide whether or not the word "outstanding" can be truly applied. Neither *Y Gangell* nor *Capel Newydd* is outstanding *architecturally*. The Council (and the Minister) decided, however, that both were outstanding *historically*. In the context of Wales this was certainly a right decision.

There are other examples of grants being given for buildings which, had they been in England, and even perhaps in Scotland, might well have failed to pass the eligibility test. A house such as *Taliaris Park*, near Llandilo, for instance, would not be outstanding in Derbyshire or Kent, but situated as it is in Carmarthenshire, it undoubtedly falls into that category. The early eighteenth-century *stables of Wynnstay Hall*, Ruabon in Denbighshire (spared the fire which destroyed the old Hall in 1858) are a good robust specimen of a type of building not uncommon in England but rarely encountered in Wales.

The preponderance of "great" houses in the Principality is in the North. Chirk and Powis (both converted Edwardian castles), and Nanteos, near Aberystwyth are examples. Between them these three have received more than £77,000 towards vitally necessary structural repairs.

Nanteos (fig. 1) is one of the finest examples in Wales of an early eighteenth-century mansion. It is set in a magnificent



FIG. I. Nanteos, before and after restoration.

landscape, has a severe external aspect, but a handsome and elaborate interior, decorated very soon after the house was built and still little altered. In the dignified late eighteenth-century stables is housed an important collection of old horse-drawn passenger vehicles.

Powis Castle, near Welshpool, was presented to the National Trust in 1952. Parts of it date from 1310, but substantial alterations and additions were made during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its eighteenth-century hanging gardens and terraces, Grand Staircase and Long Gallery make it one of the most spectacular buildings in Britain.

Chirk Castle, near Wrexham (fig. 2), is Powis's chief rival in many respects. Built at the same date, it was once owned by Sir Thomas Scymour, who married Katherine Parr, and later by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. In 1595, Sir Thomas Myddelton bought it, and it has remained in the family ever since.

Three lesser castles, all in the south, have been awarded grants totalling £14,880. *St. Donat's*, in Glamorgan, competently restored in the late nineteenth century and skilfully added to and "glorified" by William Randolph Hearst in the 1920's, is now occupied by the Atlantic College. *Penhow*, in Monmouthshire (fig. 3), is made up of three buildings dating from the fourteenth, fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the oldest of which—a fourteenth-century rectangular tower—is externally complete. *Penrice*, overlooking a marvellously unspoilt part of the Gower Peninsula, is mainly eighteenth century. Its splendid rooms retain their original cornices, fireplaces and doors. For delicate craftsmanship and pleasing proportions these are probably unequalled in any house in Wales.

In a few cases, grants have been given solely for the repair of the contents of a house. At *Fonmon Castle*, Barry, which is claimed to be the oldest continuously inhabited dwelling in Wales, there is a remarkable collection of family portraits by masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These, and some Georgian furniture of the first water, received a grant towards the cost of their restoration.

Perhaps the most significant large mansion in South Wales is *Tredegar Park*, near Newport in Monmouthshire. With its wealth of external carved detail in stone and internal carved detail in wood, this heroically proportioned house, built by William Morgan between 1664 and 1672, is undoubtedly the most important building of its period in Wales. The almost contemporary riding school and stable block is, in itself, a building of rare beauty.

Important "town" houses are especially rare in Wales. The chief is *Plas Mawr* (fig. 5) right in the heart of the mediaeval walled town of Conway. Towards the renovation of this superb specimen of Elizabethan domestic architecture, over £36,000 has already been spent, yet there is still much work to be done. The skilled treatment of the gatehouse stonework, most of which has had to be renewed, illustrates the very high standard uniformly required by the Minister.

This exceptional standard calls, of course, for highly skilled craftsmen. It also demands of the architects employed (and in virtually every case the employment of a qualified architect is obligatory), special techniques and knowledge, not often called for in this age of office blocks and housing estates. Nevertheless, although such tasks may not be spectacularly remunerative financially, they doubtless prove satisfying to the aesthetic sense of the architects whose opportunities of indulging it are otherwise rare. Whether there are sufficient of them willing and able to operate in this specialist field, is a question on which there may well be doubt.

Where considerable expenditure is necessary for modernisation, such as electric wiring, heating and interior decoration (none of which normally qualifies for a grant, but all of which may be essential if a house is to be a viable proposition), the grant proposed may be as much as 80% of the allowable total. This, however, is very exceptional indeed, and is subject to special Treasury approval.

In determining what proportion of the cost should be borne by each of the partners to these restorative operations, namely the owner and the State, the Council has to be careful to see that grant-aid does not unduly relieve owners of their ordinary

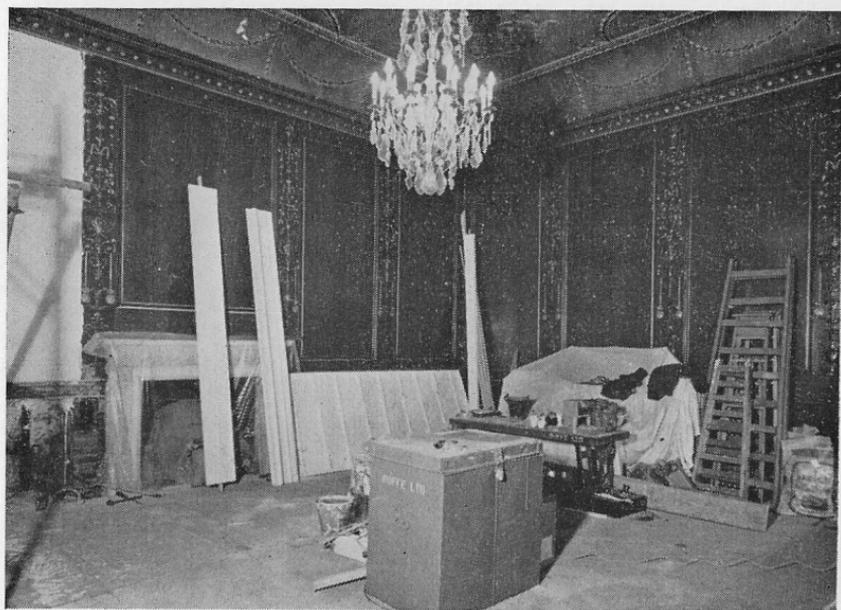


FIG. 2. Chirk Castle—The State Dining Room before and after restoration.



FIG. 3. Penhow Castle, Monmouthshire.



FIG. 4. Halghton Hall.

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liability for repairs. The underlying purpose of the Act, after all, is to assist those who genuinely cannot afford, under today's conditions, to keep their historic possessions in proper order.

With very rare exceptions (such as a town house, the street elevation of which is alone outstanding), an essential condition of State aid under the Act is that buildings upon which public money is expended shall be open to the public. This is only reasonable. In cases where regular opening days are inappropriate, viewing by appointment with the owner is substituted.

Buildings which are wholly or in part scheduled as Ancient Monuments are not necessarily debarred from assistance under the Act. *Cochwillan Hall*, near Bangor, probably the finest piece of late mediaeval domestic architecture surviving in North Wales, is an interesting case in point (fig. 6).

A number of civic buildings, especially Town Halls, have figured in the list of grant-aided structures. Among these the *Old Market Hall at Llanidloes* in Montgomeryshire is of especial interest. It is believed to be the only surviving free-standing market hall in Wales with the arches still unblocked. *The Town Hall at Bangor*, basically sixteenth-seventeenth-century, is one of the rare early buildings in a city of remarkably few good buildings of any date. For over 300 years it was the Bishop's Palace. With the help of a grant, it has been transformed from a grim, mouldering nonentity, into a distinguished central feature of the city.

The sixteenth-century *Town Hall of Llantwit Major*, Glamorgan, which is uncommonly free from modern encumbrances, is another instance of a public edifice forming part of a group of old buildings, and giving character to an ancient town.

There are other buildings, public and private, which in themselves might not have qualified for grants, but which, by virtue of their significance to the coherent character of a street scene, have in fact done so. A typical example is the *Town Hall at Laugharne* in Carmarthenshire. Although rather spoiled by later additions, the building is outstanding historically as part of the unique character of a town with a very ancient corporation created by charter in 1307. As such it rightly received a grant.

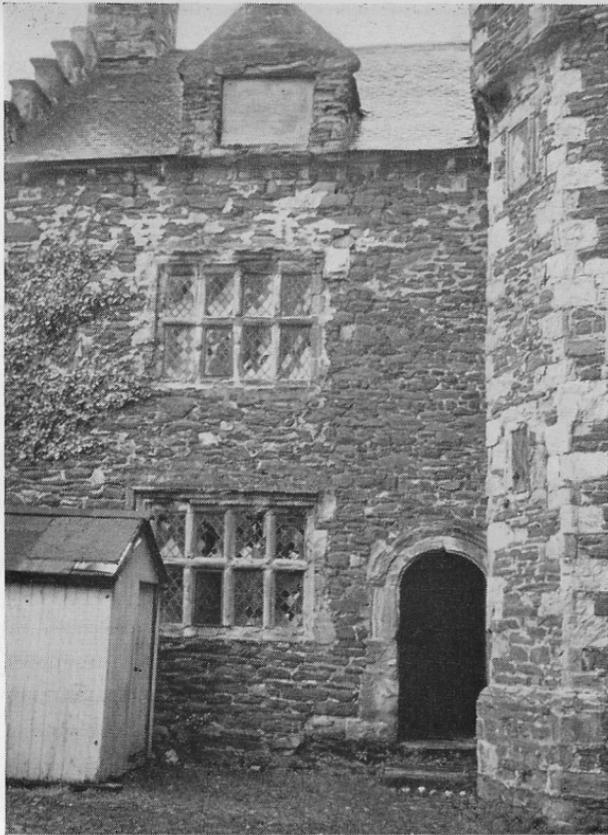


FIG. 5. Plas Mawr, Conway, before and after restoration.

J. A. Jones, Llandudno

The general paucity of unspoiled streets in Welsh towns gives the exceptions, such as St. James Street, Monmouth, special value. Neither *St. James House* nor *The Grange* (No. 14 James Street), is of particular interest internally. They were given aid because of the contribution of their front elevations to the street scene.

One of the harder tasks which confronts the Council is that of advising the Minister "on ways of finding new uses for historic buildings". He is understandably reluctant to invest public money in an uninhabited building. The rapid decay of aged houses, if they are neglected through no use being found for them, is well illustrated by the sad case of *Ynysmaengwn*, near Towyn in Merionethshire. No amount of investigation has succeeded in inducing anyone to take over this distinguished mansion. It is now beyond repair. Since the Act was passed, however, such cases have become rare.

Not every grant-aided building is inhabited in the ordinary way. The *gatehouse of Gilar Farm*, Pentrevoelas, is an instance. It is one of the very few remaining seventeenth-century gatehouses in the country. Another untenanted structure is the eighteenth-century *Pigeon House*, believed to be unique in the Principality, which is a delightful feature of the grounds of *Abercamlais* mansion, near Brecon. Here doves once occupied the upper part, while the lower portion was used as a privy. These structures qualified for assistance because both Gilar Farm and Abercamlais house are occupied and of considerable architectural merit.

There are numerous manor and farm houses which come up before the Council. The County of Montgomery is richer in half-timbered specimens than is the rest of Wales. Four of the most outstanding of these have received grants. In Radnorshire, at Bleddfa, there stands *Monaughty*, the oldest and largest manor house in the County. This, as well as *Trebecca Fawr* at Talgarth (a good example of an Elizabethan manor house), and *Halghton Hall*, Bangor-on-Dee (fig. 4) (the moat of which still survives on two sides), have been put in good order with the help of grants. So have the charming early seventeenth-century *Alms-*

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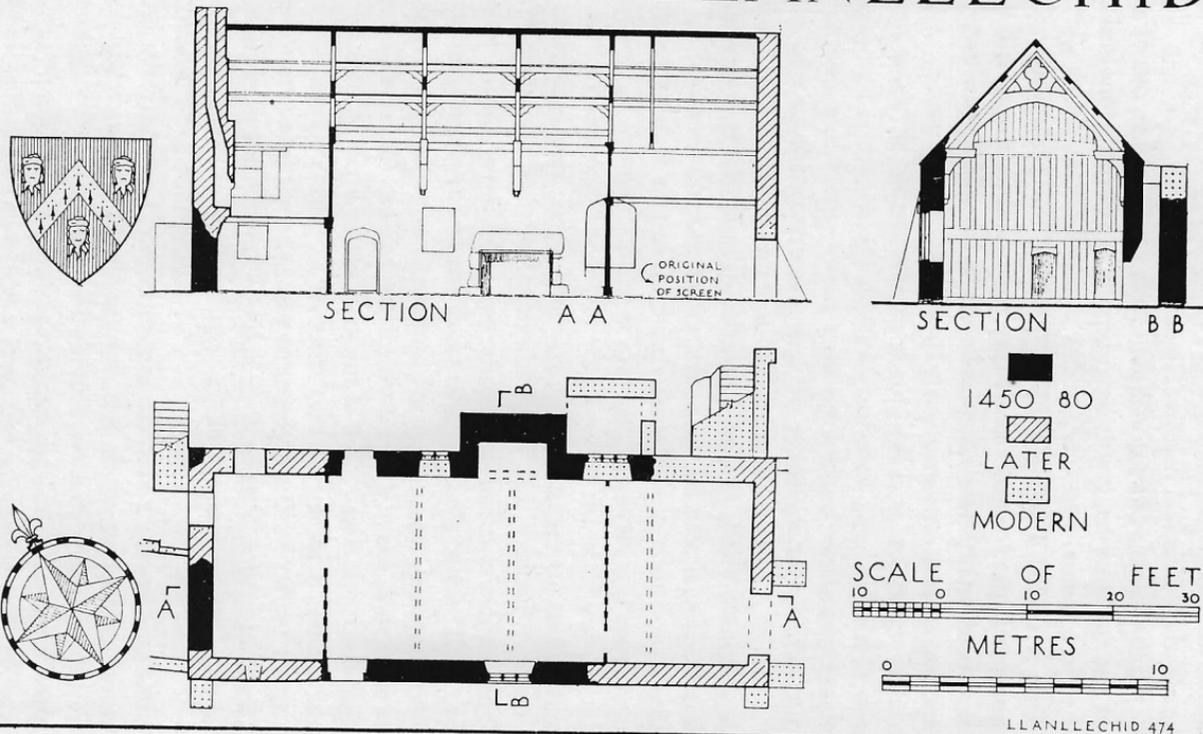


FIG. 6. Cochwillan, Llanllechid, Caernarvonshire.

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houses at Penmynydd in Anglesey, some of the windows of which retain their original diamond panes.

In the first eleven years of the Council's existence, out of a total of 294 applications, grants have been made to sixty-nine buildings. Average annual expenditure has worked out at about £27,000. This is surely a small price to pay for the preservation of an important part of the Principality's national heritage. I, for one, know of many less acceptable ways in which the taxpayers' money is spent.