

SOME RECENT DISCOVERIES AT LLANCAEACH-FAWR, A 16th CENTURY GLAMORGAN GENTRY HOUSE

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Llancaeath-fawr is one of the small group of gentry houses in Glamorgan which continued the tradition of the medieval first floor hall well into the 16th century.¹ Among these houses it is particularly notable for its unusual location and for its defensive strength, both in appearance and in fact.

Llancaeath-fawr stands about one mile from the modern colliery town of Nelson, and thus well to the north both of the fertile coastal plain and of other gentry houses of similar date and form. It is plainly a defensive building with "something of the look of a tower house, an impression created by height, the absence of large windows on the ground floor, the massive battered walls and the gaunt and forbidding air".² Internally it was considerably altered in the seventeenth century when a new stair tower was added, but it still possesses evidence of an extraordinary number of sixteenth century mural stairs which link the three floors and attics above into a complex circulation pattern.

An elevational drawing of Llancaeath-fawr (part of a complete survey by John Garrard and Gareth Thomas) was published by John Hilling in his "*Cardiff and the Valleys*" (Lund Humphries, 1973). The house was then in private occupation as a farmhouse. It was still little known in 1981 when a detailed survey and description appeared in Part 1 of Volume IV of the *Glamorgan Inventory* (RCAHM, Wales). In that year the house was acquired by Rhymney Valley District Council,³ which commissioned a thorough programme of repair and conservation directed by the Project Office of the Welsh School of Architecture under the supervision of Professor John Eynon. The general principle of this work has been minimal intervention, but major repair has been required to many of the main structural timbers, especially the inner lintels over the splayed window embrasures and the bearings of the main floor beams and principal rafters and roof tie beams. These timbers have been consolidated in-situ, either by clasp steel reinforcements which leave the original work undisturbed or, where that is impracticable, by reconstitution of the bearing element in reinforced resin. The work has required the temporary removal of all floorboards and of limited areas of plaster, which in turn has allowed investigation of some of the features which were not accessible when the RCAHM survey was made.

Llancaeath-fawr is 'L' shaped on plan, with three floors and large attics in the roof space. The principal rooms are all on the first floor, where the hall occupies the longer side of the 'L', the

parlour or 'presence chamber' the space at the angle of the 'L' and the main 'bed-chamber' the short side of the 'L'. Massive chimney structures separate these three areas from each other, the same general plan being repeated on the floors above and below. What contributes most to the special character of Llancaeach-fawr is the complex system of inter-connections between these large rectangular spaces. These connections are shown in part in the beautiful drawings of the Inventory, but the recent discoveries provide a basis for a fuller explanation of the circulatory system of the sixteenth century house.

We must begin, as visitors to Llancaeach in the sixteenth century had to begin, at the only ground floor entrance, the porch which stands out from the south-west end of the main front of the house. From this porch a door, secured internally by a heavy timber drawbar, leads into the main volume of the house. In the Inventory there is a suggestion that a cross-passage led from this door across the width of the house to the mural staircase which rises to the north side of the hall. Because such an approach would have bypassed the defences of the main entrance door to the hall, this interpretation of the plan must now be rejected. But there is still much uncertainty about the original sixteenth century arrangement of the space immediately inside the doorway from the porch. Possibly there was a small guard room, or porter's lodge, lit by the slit window which can be seen squeezed into the angle between the porch and the front wall of the house. On the other hand the heavy cambered beams over this space are all continuously chamfered. They lack mortices in their soffits and all other signs of partition fixings. However, whatever the layout of partitions here, it seems most unlikely that visitors were allowed direct access to the ground floor of the main house.

Having passed scrutiny at the porch doorway, the sixteenth century visitor would have turned left and ascended the stairs (subsequently enlarged and better lit) to the lobby which runs across the west end of the hall. At the far end of this lobby an arched doorway, again protected by a heavy inner drawbar behind the door, leads into the lower end of the hall. The removal of the floor boards and of nineteenth century partitions which divided up the hall has revealed that the term 'lower end' is literally accurate. Two-thirds of the way to the East wall one of the beams supporting the floor of the hall forms the riser of a permanent dais (Figure 1a). The step in the floor is repeated in the centre of the window seat of the window on the South side.⁴ On the North side the riser beam runs to the east jamb of the hall fireplace. West of that fireplace is the opening to the mural stair which descends from the lower end of the hall to the kitchen and service areas below.

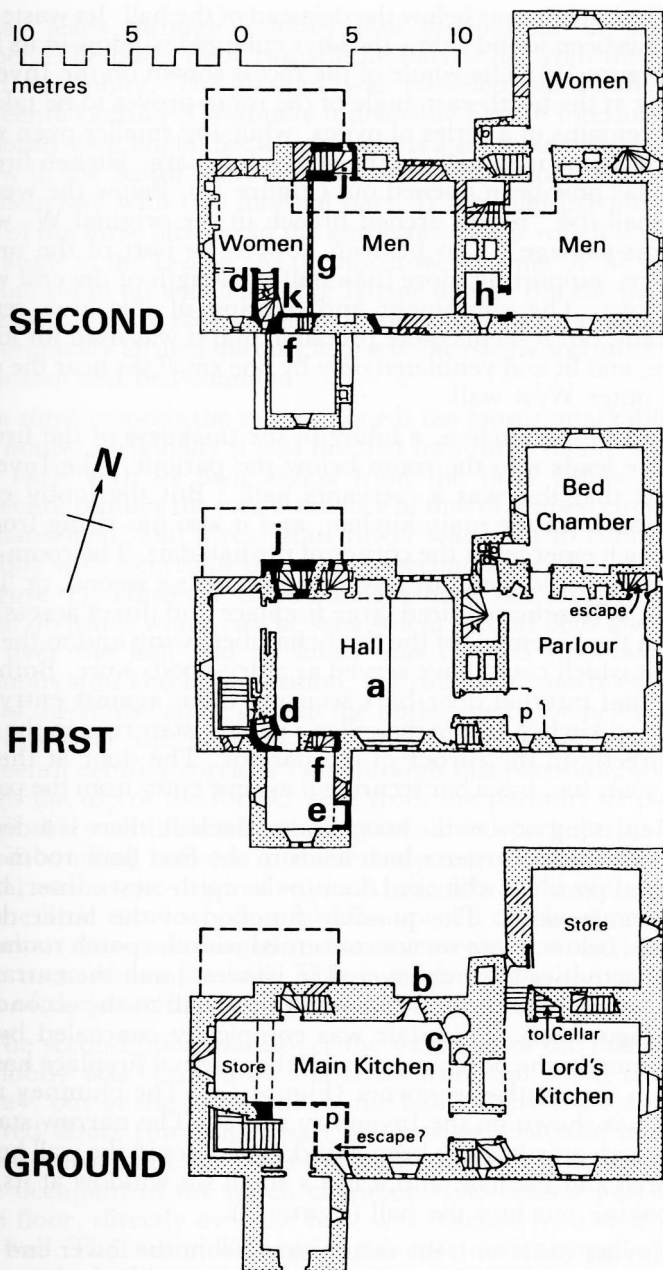


Fig. 1: Recent discoveries at Llancaeach-fawr, Glamorgan.
 (plans adapted from *Glamorgan Inventory*, RCAHM Wales, 1981).

The kitchen was below the dais end of the hall. Its waste drain outlet has been found below the later enlarged window in its North wall (Figure 1b). The whole of the recess shown on the Inventory drawing at the north-east angle of the room proves to be taken up by the remains of a series of ovens, while the smaller oven shown on the drawing is actually in the jamb of the large kitchen fireplace which has now been opened out (Figure 1c). Below the west end of the hall the "recent arched breach in the original W. wall of the cross-passage"⁵ can be seen now to be part of the original structure, supporting more than half the length of the end wall of hall above. The equipment and lighting of this area remains uncertain, but it seems quite probable that it was used for kitchen storage, and lit and ventilated only by one small slit near the centre of the outer West wall.

East of the kitchen, a lobby in the thickness of the fireplace structure leads into the room below the parlour. The Inventory suggests that this was a 'servants hall'.⁶ But the lobby can be barred off from the main kitchen, and it also has rising from it a stair which emerges at the corner of the hall dais. The room below the parlour could therefore have functioned as a second, or 'lord's' kitchen. It has the required large fireplace and direct access to the cellar in the basement of the 'bed-chamber' wing and to the room above it which could have served as a dry-goods store. Both these spaces had internal door bars securing them against entry from the second kitchen. From the cellar a narrow stair rises in the South wall directly to the corner of the parlour. The door at the head of this stair, too, has a bar securing it against entry from the parlour.

Returning now to the lower end of the hall, there is a doorway in its south-west corner which leads to the first floor room of the porch and possibly, a blocked door in the north-west corner, behind the entrance door. The possible function of the latter door is discussed below. Here we are concerned with the porch room door. Recent activities have uncovered in its west jamb the entrance to a stair which rises in the West wall of the hall to the second floor level (Figure 1d). This stair was completely concealed by later alterations. In the porch room itself the original fireplace has been found in the south-east corner (Figure 1e). The chimney to this fireplace is shown on the Inventory survey. The narrow staircase to the porch attic has also been found. This rises in the wall between the porch and the hall, and it has a small slit window at its lower end looking out into the hall (figure 1f).

Having dealt with the connections from the lower end of the hall, and some of their ramifications, we can as it were move up the social scale by stepping up on the dais to join the lord's family. The dais has windows at both North and South ends. From it a

doorway leads through a lobby into the parlour or presence chamber. The outer door can still be barred off from the hall to protect the lobby. The parlour was panelled out in the early seventeenth century. Originally it probably had an internal porch in its south-west angle, for which there is a separate drip moulded window in the South wall. The bed-chamber beyond the parlour has a doorway with two internal bars. It also had private access to one of the three latrines in the garderobe tower which is clasped in the angle of the L-plan. At the north-west corner of the parlour is a small room off which another latrine opens. But the principal feature of this small room is the evidence of the circular stone stair which originally formed the only access to the rooms and attics above the parlour and bed-chamber.

In some respects the second floor is the most remarkable part of the house. Originally it was divided into three totally separate areas, each with its own access from the floor below. In the seventeenth century the inconvenience of that organised circulation was abandoned, and a rear stair tower was built to connect the hall lobby with a corridor through the second floor (dotted outline on Figure 1). However these changes have not obliterated the original divisions which can be seen still at second floor level. The space over the hall and its lobby was divided into two by a continuous stud and lath partition; the run of the mortices for the heads of the studs can be seen in the underside of the beam which now rests over the head of the later stairs (Figure 1g). The seventeenth century corridor cuts through this partition, and also through the top of the former stair from the parlour; its passage through this wall is cleanly made good, aided perhaps by a lack of good bonding between the internal cross-wall and the main external wall in the original work. At the other end of this cross-wall, the little room which originally opened off the room above the parlour was re-arranged in the seventeenth century to open off the room above the hall. This is evident from the moulding details of the doorframes (Figure 1h).

The second floor space over the west end of the hall and its outer lobby was reached by the stairs from the porch chamber doorway, out of the lower end of the hall. There is no evidence of barred doors (the upper part of the stair structure has been completely lost), but the use of this stair could easily be supervised by the occupant of the porch chamber. The central part of the second floor, directly over the hall, was reached by a stair in the North wall. The second floor end of this stair, with its small window to the north, had been found before the RCAHM survey and is shown on the Inventory plan (Figure 1j); what was not clear then was that it is the top end of a stair descending from this point to

first floor level. The lower end has still not been found. For some time it seemed possible that it originally opened out of the main lobby at the west of the hall, being thus obscured by the central pillar of the seventeenth century stair tower. It is now thought most likely that the stairway opens into the hall, as mentioned above, by a doorway, behind the main entrance, which is now covered by 17th century plastering.

The attics above the second floor were also divided into three sections. At the west end of the hall the closed partition was continued up into the roof structure. There is evidence in the South wall of the second floor space here that a second stair continued over the one from the porch lobby up into the attic. The window lighting this stair is recorded in the Inventory, but the recent work has revealed more of the recess formed for it in the outer wall (Figure 1k). The stair would have partitioned off a small room at the south-west angle of the second floor, lit by the narrow window which still exists in the South wall. There was no access from the 'middle' room on the second floor to any attic. The attics above it and above the room over the parlour are reached by a stair from the 'family' end of the house, next to the garderobe tower. Lastly there is the attic over the back 'bed-chamber' wing; this is reached by its own stair, rising in the south-east corner of that wing.

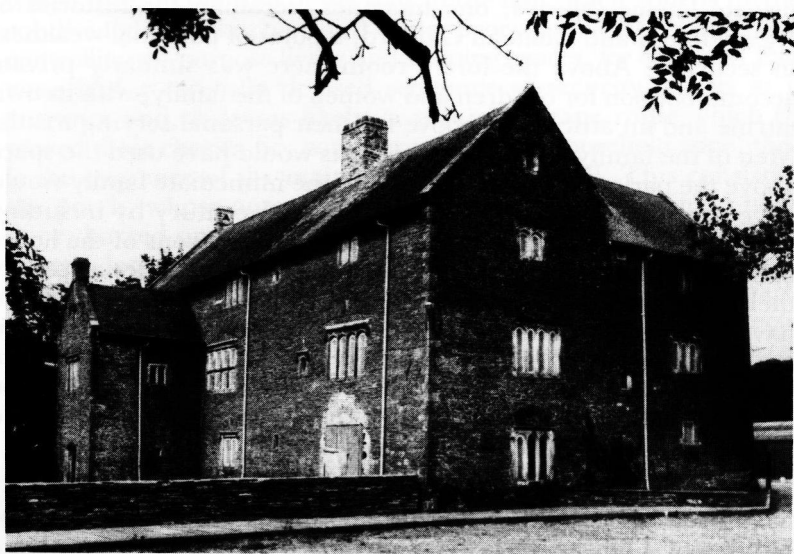
Summarising, we find that the sixteenth century house was divided into two entirely separate zones, household and family, which meet at the step of the dais in the hall. Each zone is further subdivided into kitchen and supervisory areas, the latter both controlling all-purpose living and sleeping spaces, for each sex. Each zone had a carefully devised sequence of security checks at its entrance and, it seems likely, a planned escape route which bypassed these checks. So, considering first the household zone, there is the sequence of the main entrance to the hall. This consists of the porch, whose outer door is not barred, then the main house door, barred on the inside, which leads to a space lit only by a narrow loop and probably partitioned to make a porter's lodge.⁷ Next came the stone stairs to the first floor lobby, now partly replaced in timber, the lobby itself and, at its end, the protected entrance to the hall. This suite of spaces would accommodate a complete security team. At least at night there would have been a watchman in the porch, to identify visitors and pass the word to the porter who controlled the area behind the main barred entrance. He would pass visitors on to the duty guard outside the hall door; the men of the household, who acted as the relief to this guard, would occupy the second floor room over the hall. The hall itself, once the barred entrance door is passed, forms the heart of the house. It is connected downwards to the kitchen zone and

upwards to the western end of the second floor and attics. The latter space, being firmly supervised by whoever occupied the porch, may well have been assigned to the women of the household. The presence of a fireplace (much rebuilt in the nineteenth century) in this upper room is support for this interpretation. The porch room itself was perhaps the office of the comptroller or chaplain and the administrative centre of the house. There is no sign of any consecrated chapel in the building. The attic over this room was used as a bedroom—there are many candle burns on the arch-braced truss which spans it—and, having a barred door, was perhaps the storage place for the household valuables and documents in the comptroller's care.

East of the dais in the hall, the whole east end of the house formed an inner fortress for the lord and his family and private servants. Again there is the sequence of protected access, a barred door from the hall, a lobby (which could have had a guard space above it), and then the parlour porch. Lit by its own window, this would have formed another security checkpoint before a visitor could enter the presence of the occupant of the parlour. And if all these checks failed, that occupant could make his, or her, escape down the steps to the cellar remembering to bar the door from the parlour on the way. On the ground floor, the complex of kitchens and service stairs allowed the preparation and service of entirely separate meals for family and household. In the upper part of the family zone the lord had his own separate sleeping room, with private latrine (always, one imagines, recalling the histories of Agamemnon and Chateau Gaillard, a point of potential weakness in security). Above the lord's room there was similarly private accommodation for children and women of the family, with its own latrine and an attic space above for their personal serving maids. Men of the family and their attendants would have used the space above the parlour. It seems likely that the immediate family would have continued the practice of the fifteenth century by including the male children of other local landed families, sons of the house being likewise sent out to neighbouring gentry families as part of their education in etiquette and the skills of combat.⁸ It could have been one of the duties of this male group to provide a guard in the little room at the south-west corner of the second floor room which spans over the lobby entrance to the parlour. If it had been provided with floor loops (of which there is now no sign) it would have made a good security vantage point.

Why would a house with such an obsessive concern for security have been built in this hitherto remote part of Glamorgan? The builder of *Llancaeach-fawr* is identified in the Inventory as a descendant of the native Welsh lords of *Senghenydd*.⁹ Their

territory lay between the Tâf and Rhymni rivers and extended from the Brecon Beacons to the coast. The coastal plain was lost to the first wave of Norman incursions into Glamorgan, but in 1158 the celebrated Ifor Bach kidnapped William Earl of Gloucester from Cardiff Castle and secured a guarantee of continued independence.¹⁰ This lasted until 1267 when Gilbert de Clare annexed the whole territory. The native lordship was divided then into two 'commotes', Is-Caeach, centred around Caerffili (Caerphilly), and Uwch-Caeach, which stretched northwards from Llancaeach-fawr's position. Uwch-Caeach thus consisted mainly of steep-sided thickly wooded valleys and open moorland grazing, farmed then by transhumance. In the fifteenth century, by service to the various absentee lords of Glamorgan, the descendants of Ifor Bach succeeded in forming a new freehold estate, mainly in Uwch-Caeach. Lewis ap Richard (d.1521) had his 'neuadd' or hall at Merthyr Tydfil (where some part of the structure may still survive in the walls of the so-called Court House).¹¹ His elder son Edward, taking Lewis as his surname, transferred the senior branch of the family to the now-ruined house called Y Fan at Caerffili, which thus replaced the great castle as the principal gentry seat in Is-Caeach.¹² The younger son, Richard, or his son, David ap Richard (Prichard), perhaps by some continuance of the Welsh system of partible inheritance, obtained lands in Uwch-Caeach and built Llancaeach-fawr.



Llancaeach-fawr from the south-east, July 1985.

No doubt the preoccupation with security at Llancaeach-fawr reflects some continuation of the lawlessness of the late fifteenth century. But more significant may be the extent to which Richard ap Lewis or his son David were using strong-arm tactics in carving out an estate for themselves in a locality where feudal control had been relatively lax. The Inventory records lawsuits and even brawling between the Prichards and their senior kinsmen later in the sixteenth century.¹³ Perhaps it is also relevant that during the sixteenth century large scale iron-smelting began in the Tâf valley. The incoming iron masters were notorious as exploiters of woodlands. If the Prichard family took part in these depredations they may easily have stirred up some violent local animosities.¹⁴

The social and economic circumstances of the building of Llancaeach-fawr are likely always to remain obscure, but the resulting domestic environment is now plain to see.¹⁵ In its elaborate security precautions it offers a new witness of the pressures that were an accepted part of some sixteenth century lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Peter Smith, Secretary of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, and to his staff for permission to make use of the survey drawings of Llancaeach-fawr in the Glamorgan Inventory, and for liberty to quote so extensively from the historical background to the building of the house which is given in the Inventory introduction and text descriptions. The Director of the Project Office of The Welsh School of Architecture, Mr. John Roberts, and his colleague Mr. Alwyn Jones have given generously of their time in making sure that I have been shown the various discoveries made at Llancaeach-fawr in the course of the programme of consolidation that they have been directing.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. These houses, including Llancaeach-fawr, have been fully described in the *Glamorgan Inventory*, Vol. IV, Part 1.
2. *Inventory*, IV.1, 6.
3. In the 1972 reorganisation, Rhymney Valley District Council succeeded Gelligaer Urban District Council, which had initiated the first industrial housing Conservation Area in Wales, at Butetown, Rhymney. The new District Council has continued an exceptionally strong interest in conservation issues.

4. The seat is of sixteenth century date, but the mullioned and transomed window is probably a seventeenth century improvement.
5. *Inventory*, IV.1, 123.
6. *Ibid.*
7. As noted above there is no present evidence of such a lodge, except the curious plan of the slit window lighting the space it would have occupied. If the main entrance layout followed the principles used for the family rooms, one would expect some form of 'secret' escape route to have been provided out of the ground floor at this point.
8. See for example the Paston letters.
9. *Inventory*, IV.1, 115.
10. *Inventory*, III.2, 6.
11. *Ibid.*, 7 and IV.1, 192.
12. *Inventory*, IV.1, 192.
13. *Ibid.*, 115.
14. The anonymous sixteenth century author of the Welsh poem "Coed Glyn Cynon", lamenting the burning of the forests in the Cynon valley on the Western border of Uwch-caeach wrote (fourth stanza), "Many a birch tree green of cloak/ (I'd like to choke the Saxon!)/ is now a flaming heap of fire/ where iron-workers blacken", (translation by Gwyn Williams) *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English*, OUP, 1978, 70.
15. The house is not expected to open to the public before 1987.