



A Tale of Two Schools – Part 2 By Paddy Landers

From 1951 to 1967, Tredegar House was home to St Joseph's Convent High School. This was a private school for up to 400 girls, about 40 of whom were boarders. For most of the pupils it was an idyllic existence. The beautiful buildings, the wonderful grounds and a very supportive staff, most of whom were Sisters of St Joseph, though there were also some lay teachers.

However, in the 1960s Comprehensive education had arrived in Newport and there was considerable demand for a comprehensive school to educate all of the girls and boys from Catholic homes. The sisters agreed to join with two other schools in the town to create St Joseph's High School. It was decided that a new school would be built on the kitchen gardens and the orchards of Tredegar House.

The new school was opened in 1967, but the money to build the school was provided by the Welsh Office over a number of years so until 1974, education took place in new buildings, temporary demountable classrooms and Tredegar House. The Oak Room, Gilt Room and New Hall were quickly taken out of use as the new buildings were opened, but there were classrooms on the first floor and some in the Attics. The stables were used as an assembly hall. It was during these years that an organisation (sadly, name unknown) approached the school and offered to regild the Gilt Room at no cost.

When the school finally moved out of the House, they took three things with them. Firstly, there was the skeleton of a whale which had adorned the wall of the Riding School. This has always been exhibited in the science department of the school. It is believed to be part of Evan's collection. Secondly, the school needed a motto. On the wall of the school hall in Tredegar House (New Hall) was the crest of the Morgan family and the family motto taken from the letters of St Paul:

SI Deus Nobiscum quis contra.
With God on our side who can be against us.

The first part of the motto was used so that the school maintained a link with Tredegar House. The school crest was updated for the new school in 2005 but the motto remains the same.

Finally, when the school vacated the House, they kept ownership of one building, the Laundry. At first, it was used as a Boathouse to house the school's canoes, but following the death of the Headteacher, money was donated by past and current pupils and parents to create the Joseph Witherington Pastoral Centre. This building housed a Chapel, kitchen, meeting room and Reading room. Central heating and toilets were installed and the building made sound. It was used by the school during the day and by church and community groups in the evenings and at weekends. The Chapel housed beautiful stained glass windows which had been a gift to the school by the monks of Prinknash Abbey. They are now in the Chapel of the new school. Behind the Laundry was a very attractive Chapel garden. The Pastoral Centre was in use until 2005 when the school moved to new buildings and the Laundry reverted to the ownership of Newport City Council.



The Mystery of a Lost Beauty

In February this year, Morgan biographers Will Cross and Monty Dart came across an interesting article in The Sketch Magazine about Lois Sturt – first wife of Evan Morgan, Viscount Tredegar. In 1921 Lois appeared in no less than 7 portraits or drawings in one exhibition, including a self portrait. Will decided to track down the present owners of the paintings and was amazed to find that we were not the only ones looking for the enigmatic Lois – within a day we discovered that one of the portraits was up for auction, the estimate, £700 as the sitter was described as just 'An Aristocratic Lady' by Ambrose McEvoy. Dreweatts in Berkshire, a well known auction house suddenly found itself in a bidding war, two bidders had identified the lady as Lois Sturt. The portrait of this hitherto unknown beauty sold for £41,216, more than doubling the artist's previous auction record. Ambrose McEvoy painted at least three portraits of Lois Sturt but this particular one somehow had its name written as 'Stuart' when it had sold previously at Christies in 1987.

The buyer turned out to be Phillip Mould, who used his fine art detective skills to discover that the subject of the portrait was Lois. Well known for his appearances on the Antiques Roadshow and a specialist dealer in British Art and Old Masters, Mould is about to open a new gallery in Pall Mall. His intention is to clean the portrait of its layers of grime and cigarette smoke and then to sell it.

Lois was the daughter of the 2nd Baron Alington, she studied at the Slade School of Art. In 1920, when the portrait was painted, Lois was debutante of the year. Barbara Cartland a close friend described her as "fiery, impetuous and with dark, flashing eyes", artist Wyndham Lewis said she was "the most beautiful debutante of her day". A true 'wild child' she was a leader of The Bright Young things, she was fearless and owned a pilot's licence, enjoyed driving fast cars and loved the party life. She was also an actress appearing as Nell Gwyn in one of the first ever coloured films shown in the UK, 'This Glorious Adventure' in 1922.

The new Philip Mould and Co gallery opens at 18-19 Pall Mall on 8 June 2015.

BREAKING NEWS – I'm advised by Philip Mould that the portrait has already been sold!



Message from our Chairman – Mrs Judith Rice

At our Annual General Meeting on the 30th April I was elected by committee members to become your Chairman for the next two years. I feel very privileged to have been given this opportunity and together with the Officers and Executive members hope to provide a service that meets the needs of our members and raises funds to continue to help Tredegar House in anyway we can.

On 3rd June the Friends held their first quiz evening in the Morgan Room. It was a great success with 54 participants. We look forward to organising another quiz event in the near future. Since our last Newsletter In April we have enjoyed successful talks held in the Morgan Room both of which refer to historical information i.e. "The Case that changed the law" and "Confession letter" Octavius Morgan etc.

Our aim as Friends is to spread public interest in this historical Grade 1 listed mansion, widely acknowledged as one of the finest family homes in Wales.

If you have any talks or social events you would like the committee to organise on your behalf please feel free to contact your Chairman or any member of the Executive Committee.

Strange Spirits at Tredegar House - by Jim Dyer continued**Ringling Bells**

Over the years there have been numerous reports of sighting. These have ranged from first-hand witness accounts of parades of nuns marching through what is now the inner courtyard of The Brewhouse, to singular, ghostly figures sitting serenely in the outdoor Sunken Garden. A cleaner in the big house is reported as regularly having seen a grey-clad nun at the top of the stairs.

Only a short time ago a brave group of lads stayed the night in the Big House but would not now like to repeat the experience. Old houses are prone to creaks and strange noises and there can be no doubt that Tredegar House has its fair share. David Freeman, the curator, and his assistant Steve Sully, have an unrivalled love for the House but they retain an open mind. Mr Freeman said 'There are odd noises but you get used to them. There have also been some unexplained footsteps, lights on without cause and once the front doors were bolted – we could hear them clearly, and then quickly they were released.'

The Morgan's had an elaborate system of bells to call the staff below stairs, some 20 or so connecting every room to what is aptly called the Bell's Passage. These have been heard to sound at the most inconvenient times but it could be climatic conditions or the weather. Another old legend is that on Friday the 13th a particular carpet is stained blood red, but leaves no visible trace later.

The main entrance to the Mansion is loyally guarded by a pair of stone lions and this impressive stone stairway brings a cold shiver to those susceptible. Certainly, the outside is attractive but stark at the best of times.

One man familiar with the area told me 'Whenever I walk past I get the feeling someone is watching me. It's overpowering and my eyes are drawn up to one third floor window, but I see nothing.' This was the servants' sleeping quarters in days gone by and strange things can happen below as well as above stairs.

Even Evan Morgan, Lord Tredegar, yacht owner and eccentric may have unwittingly, in a youthful pampered way, been the catalyst for later, unacknowledged happenings.

Ghostly Outbuildings

The huge Tredegar estate still encompasses many acres and when the council embarked upon a nearby 1,000-house development they had to provide some shops and facilities. What better way than convert some of the outbuildings of Tredegar House to provide a community centre and focal point for the new residents.

In the mid-70s apples and oranges were seen to be thrown in the air in the then recently opened supermarket which alarmed two elderly passers-by in the evening – long after the tills had closed down.

When the business closed the premises became a social centre, the old façade retained with modern interior, a boon for the community and the best that could be done given tough financial parameters. If it ended there it would be fine : people would enjoy the House and the grounds and fishing in the lake.

Early in 1986 there was an odd twist and no longer could the hitherto tales of ghosts and spectres be taken lightly. The outbuildings are numerous and large, the social centre being one. Inside it is spacious and enjoys all the modern facilities, a grand little meeting place.

The same person who felt the power of the lions immediately realised there was another presence there. Maybe he was a catalyst without realising. The social centre was once a barn, now converted to two storeys, and it was upstairs that the coldness pervaded despite the more than adequate central heating. In the past year or so there have been some strange happenings there, not immediately obvious but which collectively make a fascinating catalogue.

Electric lights have been switched on and off at odd times, doors locked and unlocked, unexplained footsteps noticed. Furniture moved, wires cut, plugs pulled out and cold draughts. Fortunately, the spirits seemed more playful than dangerous but things came to a head when some staff were locked into a room.

A séance revealed there were two souls there ; Capp, a 69 year old stickman and Tradrapp, a 41 year old labourer. Both were employed on the estate and as far they were concerned were still working there though they had died in a barn fire in 1856, allegedly by a foul deed. Records show there was a fire there in the 1800's. Things quietened down for a while and indeed some sort of respectful relationship developed . But as in the course of time a new, evil presence was detected – a spirit which even scared Capp and Tradrapp, who decided at once to leave.

They said that witchcraft was still being carried out in the main house by at least 12 ghosts led by the malevolent Montcrese, a Frenchman. Contact was made with him but proved extremely harrowing. He was anxious, he said, that a séance be held in the house and was very argumentative. The impression given was of a pointed featured, black-haired man, dressed in black cloak of the 'twenties style, but no age was given.

From time to time Montcrese makes his presence felt and the activities in the House confirmed by another spirit. A young girl of about 19 who died of an illness in 1726 known only as Waif. She described the parties being held on the third floor, above the stone lions, and her words corroborated by yet another woman from 1234 known as Jullye, who reiterated Montcrese's desire for a séance in the main house.

Meanwhile a further apparition has been detected in the outbuilding and this time accompanied by the pleasant scent of fuchsia. Under the expert guidance of a well-known local medium, a young boy named Roderick has been identified, He offered no harm but died in a fall from the same building while working in the barn.

This old, huge mansion is steeped in magical connections and it is not inconceivable that there are a few more secrets yet to be revealed. Mere speculation or is there perhaps a grain of truth in these stories? It is for the reader to decide whether the palatial Tredegar House and Country Park is one of the most haunted houses in Great Britain – second only perhaps to the ill-famed Borley Rectory in Essex.

NOTES -

1. First published in Western Mail on December 31st 1987.
2. By 2012 the area surrounding Tredegar House has been extensively developed for housing and the running of the property has been handed to the National Trust though still owned by the City Council.

If any of our members have experienced any "ghostly" happenings at Tredegar House, we would be delighted to hear from you.