

‘DEAR MAMA’ : MRS OWEN OF BROGYNTYN AND THE GODOLPHIN FAMILY

Introduction

The Brogyntyn Estate¹ in Selatyn near Oswestry had established links with North Wales since 1556, when Margaret, daughter of John Lacon, was married to William Maurice of Clennau in Caernarvonshire. The family holdings in Shropshire and Denbighshire were extended by purchase and mortgage, but for decades the main life of the estate was centred on William Maurice’s home at Clennau. His father and grandfather had converted Clennau from a few scattered farmsteads into a more consolidated estate. His own judicious additions of property in Merioneth, particularly of town corporation land in Harlech, enabled his family to prosper. His appointments to several posts in county administration, though burdensome, provided him with additional lucrative opportunities. He was honoured with a knighthood in 1603. Some improvements were made to the house at Brogyntyn, or Constable’s Hall as it was called in those days, by his grand-daughter, Ellen, who married first John Owen of Bodsilin and Fernhill, and second Sir Francis Eure in 1616. During the Civil War Ellen’s two sons, Sir John Owen and Col. William Owen, won renown as Royalist commanders of Conwy and Harlech castles respectively. Sir John Owen’s son, William, married Catherine Anwyl of Parc, Llanfrothen, in 1648. He inherited both Clennau and Brogyntyn, but he based his family home at Llanddyn in Llangollen. The surviving heir of William and Catherine Owen was their son, Robert. He was knighted in 1678, served as MP for Merioneth and for the Borough of Caernarvon, and held several other local public offices. In 1683 he married Margaret, daughter of Owen Wynn and heiress to the substantial estates of Glyn, Sylfaen and Ystumcegid. A short time later he also acquired a moiety of Nant in Flintshire by a settlement with his wife’s family. By that time Brogyntyn had become the family’s main home. Unfortunately, Sir Robert Owen died prematurely in 1698, leaving massive debts, including a mortgage of £7500. Thanks to the common sense of his widow and the unstinting help of family friend, Humphrey Humphreys, Bishop of Bangor, the estate was saved intact. The successor was William Owen, thirteen at the time of his father’s death, who must have grown up with a huge weight of responsibility on his young shoulders. It would be up to him to pay off the creditors and restore the family fortune. It is at this point that our story begins.

Mrs Owen and the Godolphin family

William Owen had left it late to realise that the real solution to his problems was to find a rich wife. He was forty when he fixed his sights on Mary, daughter of Henry Godolphin, Provost of Eton and Dean of St Paul’s. He probably met Mary Godolphin through visits to her mother’s relations at Abertanat and Llangedwyn. Although financial considerations played a large part in his determined pursuit, he must also have been aware of the prestige which a connection with the Godolphins would bring. The Godolphins’ reaction to the proposal from the highly respectable but impoverished gentleman was naturally cautious. In March 1725, busybody Aunt Ellen Godolphin wrote to her sister, Margaret:

...the young Lady is very young & her Mama doce not like she should be marred so young.... and quoting the young lady's mother, 'I have nothing to object to in the world to the young Gentleman, but I wish his estate were better'.²

Three years later, the family seemed well-disposed, even positively encouraging, to Mary's suitor, but despite their best matchmaking attempts, Ellen complained

.... the Lady [is] as obstinat & unmoveable as a post and sticks.³

On the subject of marriage

....she is immoveable and gives no reason but she will not, & crys when she is spoke to as if her heart would break.⁴

Unfortunately, William Owen hampered his own chances by his blunt manner of speaking. His sister, Elizabeth, chided him

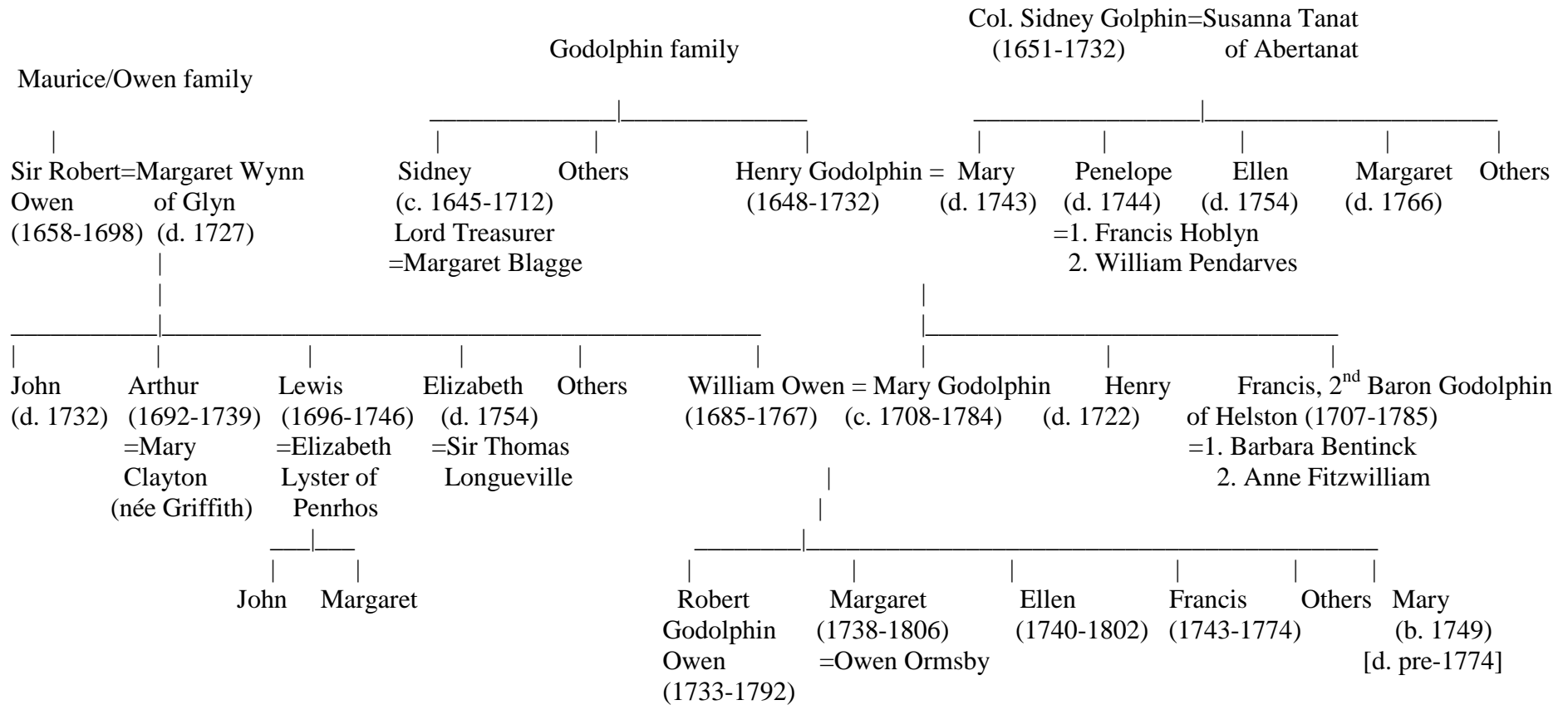
Your speaking so slightly of women has bin a great disaddvantage to you, it is much taken notice of...⁵

Mrs Godolphin was forced to acknowledge temporary defeat and prevailed upon Ellen Godolphin to write a placatory letter to William Owen:

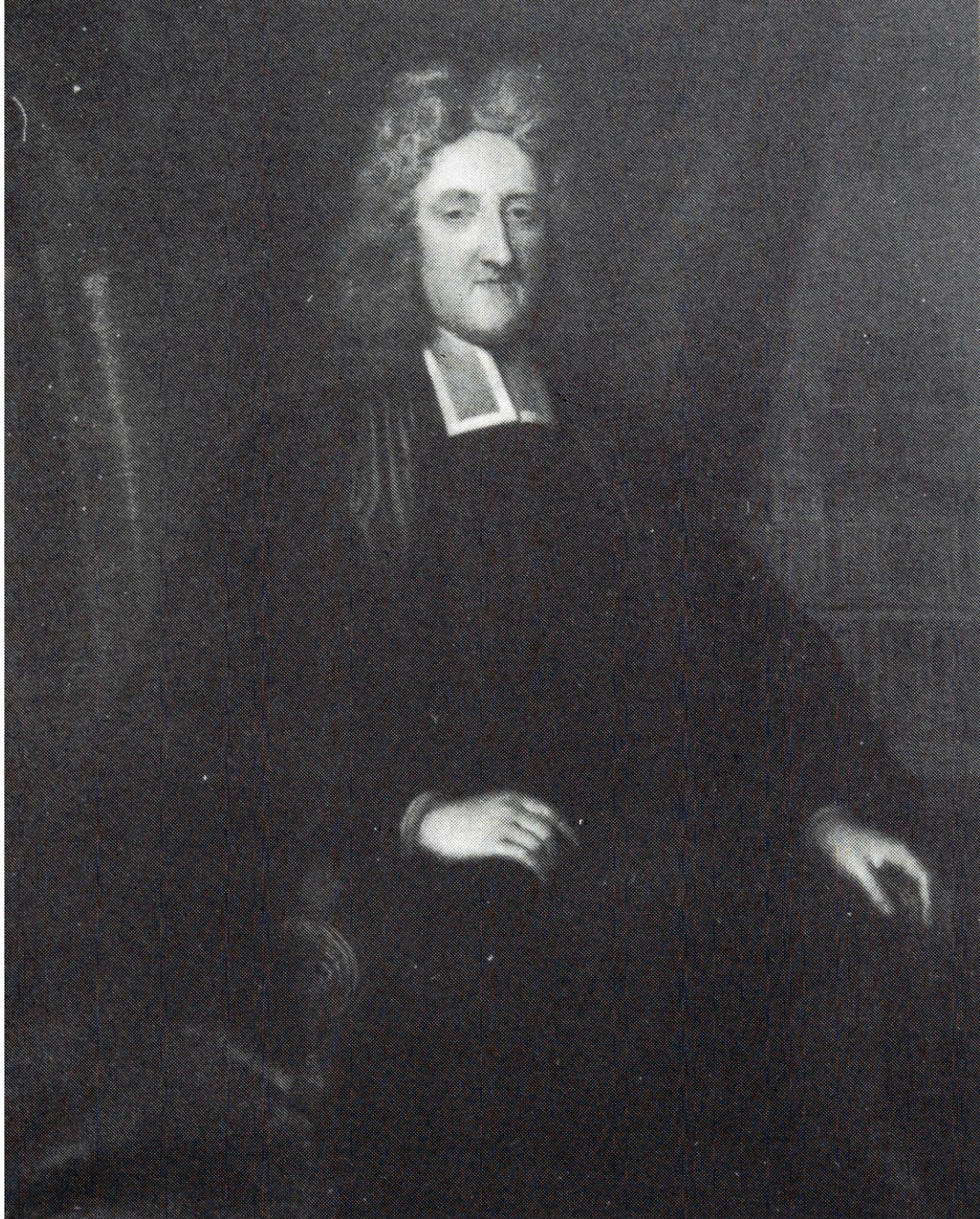
I beg you'll say something that is very hansome from us to him & that we were both very desirous of it.....I have reason to fear that had he her that he seems to desire, she would not prove that complying temper that I hoped she had in her nature & I am afraid that what ever offer we may make her will not be approved of without being her owne choice, so with her Godolphin obstinacy she must do her owne way...⁶

So adamant was Mary that her mother and her meddlesome aunts sensibly decided to let her alone for a while. Perhaps it was the easing of family pressure or simply the lack of a better offer which caused her finally to change her mind and to become Mrs Owen in 1730.

Family tree



The members of the two families, the people who were important in the life of Mary Owen, warrant some introduction. Mary's mother and father, Mary and Henry Godolphin, were distant cousins, descended from two branches of the same family.



Henry Godolphin⁷

Henry was brother to Sidney, the famous Earl Godolphin of Cornwall, Lord of the Treasury under Queen Anne. As Provost of Eton, he had found his academic niche and he was held in affection for his kindliness. He died in 1732, much mourned by

his family and friends. His wife was the daughter of another Sidney Godolphin, Auditor of Wales, who had married into the Tanat family of Abertanat on the Shropshire border. The couple produced three children, of whom 'our' Mary was the youngest. Their eldest son, Henry ('Master') Godolphin, had died in 1722 at the age of 17, an event which devastated the whole family. Mary's surviving brother was Francis, who later inherited the title Baron Godolphin of Helston upon the death of his cousin and namesake in 1766. He had made his home at Baylies, an enormous house in Buckinghamshire, where he tended his garden and entertained his friends. He and his sister were close, with shared interests in music and the theatre. In May 1733 he wrote to her excitedly:

*.....they talk of nothing at Oxford but a Publick Act, which Mr Handel is to Celebrate with two Oratorios and a very fine new Composition of Musick, but yet does not take his Degree but will assist anybody else.*⁸

Francis Godolphin's first wife was Barbara Bentinck and he was grief-stricken when she died in 1736 after only three years of marriage. He remarried in 1747 to Lady Ann Fitzwilliam, whose attractions were manifold:

*She has £8000 for her Fortune, is of a very good Height and well shaped, is neither too Tall nor too short, nor too Fat nor too lean, in short, she is all Perfection in my Eyes....*⁹

The young Godolphins had three doting aunts, who corresponded with them regularly. Aunt Margaret ('Peggy') Godolphin was a crotchety old dame, which was hardly surprising. As the heiress to Abertanat, she was saddled with its management for life. For nearly five decades she contended with poachers, disputes with neighbours, unco-operative tenants and an incompetent steward, not to mention an endless stream of well-intentioned advice from her family. In addition, Margaret suffered poor physical health for some years. Her handwriting, though never of a high standard, betrayed her decline quite dramatically towards the end of her life. Aunt Penelope Godolphin married first Francis Hoblyn of Cornwall, by whom she had a son, Robert, and second William Pendarves, a man of unpredictable temper who seems to have caused her some unhappiness. Aunt Ellen Godolphin was the most prolific and delightful correspondent - observant, gossipy, sharp-tongued and remarkably candid about her own frailties. Naturally she visited Brogyntyn and Abertanat from time to time, but most of the letters to her niece were written from the elegant surroundings of her father's home at Thames Ditton or from the family's town house in London.



William Owen¹⁰

Married life

It must have been difficult for Mary Godolphin to settle down with William Owen in the backwoods of the Welsh borders. She was about twenty-one, the inexperienced daughter of indulgent parents, accustomed to the cultivated atmosphere of Eton and genteel London society. He was much older, forty-five at the time of his marriage, until then a confirmed bachelor. Known for his solid, reliable personality, he was mayor of Oswestry, local magistrate, dependable trustee to the Mostyn family and to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn. His estate was always the focus of his life and he rarely left it. He disliked the bustle of London, the pretensions of Bath. Even on his home ground he preferred to stay out of the public limelight, unwillingly but conscientiously doing his duty as High Sheriff of Merioneth and Caernarvonshire.

Mary's letters revealed little of her feelings towards this plain-speaking country squire, but both families detected a coolness early in the marriage. Ellen Godolphin was sufficiently concerned to ask Aunt Margaret to pay her niece a visit:

*My Father begins to wonder you have not been thear & says he fanceys all doce not go right.*¹¹

William Owen's brother advised:

*In the meantime do you go on to love and cherish your wife and learn to set a true value on her and get a great many Children.*¹²

In time, the couple settled down to a steady, warm regard for one another, in a relationship based on practicalities; in the few existing letters from William Owen to his wife he always called himself her *affectionate husband*. He displayed a touch of possessiveness, or if not that, certainly a concern for her reputation as a respectable married woman, when she was staying at the Parade in Bath, March 1747:

*Pray take care of yourself and do not rake & consider that you have got a Husband; the rest of your company may do as they please.*¹³

Mary Owen's sociable nature ensured her acceptance into her husband's family. She had little time to know John Owen, who died in 1732. Likewise Arthur, a soldier, who died in 1739, leaving behind an endless tangle of administrative affairs from his wife's previous marriage. With her two surviving in-laws Mary was on very good terms. Lewis ('the Doctor') was William Owen's youngest brother, the charmer of the family: witty, entertaining and popular with the ladies. Like many younger sons of the gentry, he embarked reluctantly on a career in the church, based at Barking, Essex. His poor stipend was enhanced by the prebend of Hereford and later he obtained the living of Wexham, Buckinghamshire, where he died in 1746. During visits home to Brogyntyn, Lewis Owen had met and fallen in love with pretty Elizabeth Lyster, whose parents owned the Penrhos estate. His ardent courtship came to be the talk of Shropshire and to everyone's satisfaction they married in 1740. William Owen's sister, Elizabeth, had married Sir Thomas Longueville but the partnership ended with an acrimonious separation in 1735. Elizabeth complained *I am used as if I had bin a common whore to be turned out in such a Hurry.*¹⁴

She badgered her brother to help her obtain a fair settlement, adding

*Sir Thomas said he wod Cutt his throat if I came under the same roofe with him.*¹⁵

She spent the rest of her life wandering from one set of relatives to another, imposing upon their hospitality. Her querulous, vain, shallow nature exasperated all her friends, including Ann Owen of Ynysmaengwyn, who called her

*...this fantasticall woman that so much minds dress under all her misfortunes.*¹⁶

However, Elizabeth's heart was in the right place. Her fondness for Mary's children was evident from her letters and she bequeathed them treasured personal heirlooms in her will, written in her own neat hand and proved after her death in 1754.¹⁷



Brogyntyn Hall, Selatyn¹⁸

Whatever excitement her marriage may have lacked, Mary Owen found contentment in her home, her children, and a pet dog called Jolly. The house at Brogyntyn, or Porkington as it was then called, would have looked somewhat different from the later classical façade in the illustration, which dates from 1812 to 1824. As mistress of Brogyntyn, Mary Owen was responsible for the domestic arrangements. One of the first problems she encountered was the difficulty of obtaining good servants. Her mother commiserated with her on the discovery that her housekeeper was *fat and lazy; them two things generally go togeather*¹⁹. In general, indolence and surliness appeared to be the main complaints of the gentry, but occasionally a whiff of neighbourhood scandal surfaced as the result of undesirable liaisons among their staff. The housekeeping arrangements during William Owen's bachelor days had been distinctly lax and Mary's mother advised:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....I find Mr Owen is like my father in locking up many roomes full of treasure, but now I hope you'll have time to help him make a riddance.*²⁰

The domestic comforts of Brogyntyn were enhanced by the china and furnishings which the new Mrs Owen brought with her. Among the items carefully transported there was her precious harpsichord. Household inventories²¹ list the contents of cupboards and closets. Table linen at Porkington in the housekeeper's custody, December 1742, included:

Several diaper table cloths, monogrammed with an 'O'

4 Thick Home made Table Cloaths

2 Fringed Side Board Cloaths

7 Hugabak Long Towels

6 Bung Cloaths for the Brewer

4 Dusters for the still room and Hall

The china cabinet held:

5 Red China coffee Cups

2 Red 2 Green Chocolate Cups

Cups, 12 Saucers blue & white
1 Colloared Spitting Pot
a Delph Sugar Cover, a Tea pot, no lid, Wedgewoods
4 little white Animals
 In the garret and store room, August 1763:
1 small Soop Dish
77 Plates
2 Pewter Collenders
a large Boiler
a Copper Dredger, the Top good
a small Chocolate Pot
a Copper Funnel...
3 High Candlesticks

Among the household accounts is a detailed bill for the complete refurbishment of Mrs Owen's carriage, dated 1777, itemising leather straps, loops, buckles and bolts, rebuilding the coach box, restuffing the seat, realigning the axle, remodelling the footboard, repairs to the wheels, and the final touches with gilding, green paint and oil varnish. The cost was £28 13s 0d.²²

Home and estate

Despite his shortcomings in the romantic department, William Owen had a strong grasp of practical realities and he fully involved his wife in running the estate. He worked hard to improve productivity, keeping abreast of the latest agricultural innovations. Even so, the outgoings were always likely to be heavy; the estate accounts included many receipts for tithes, taxes, poor rates and repairs to properties. The income from rents was not reliable, with tenants falling into arrears due to bad harvests, poor farming practices or ill-health. Landowners were always at the mercy of their managing agents and could not personally supervise their activities due to the extensive spread of the estates. At Clenennau, remote in the Caernarvonshire mountains, the agent was Griffith Parry. He was hard-working, well thought of, but quick to quarrel with his neighbours, the Lloyds of Cesail Gyfarch, over access to a cattle-watering place.²³ Eight years of legal wrangling ensued, for which William Owen had to foot the bill. Griffith Parry's brother, John Parry of Bryn Banon, succeeded him as agent of the Caernarvonshire and Merioneth estates from 1742 to 1751. He acquired notoriety in a different way. A bill of complaint was submitted [c. 1754] to the Court of Chancery, in which he and his confederates stood accused of concealment of heriots and timber profits, cutting and selling timber, falsification of accounts, negligence and fraud in dealing with estate repairs.²⁴ His employers had been aware of his activities for some time, since at least 1748, and his protests of innocence were useless in the face of such damning evidence. Another source of worry was the run-down Montgomeryshire estate which Mary had inherited from Margaret Godolphin. There were undoubtedly benefits, such as the valuable timber, a regular supply of homemade brawn and the impressive heirloom silver adorned with the Dolphin crest. However, the reports of the struggling agent made depressing reading and after Mary's death in 1784, the house was a virtual wreck.

Upon his marriage William Owen realised that his rambling old home at Brogyntyn would need some improvements. Mary's generous dowry ensured that the estate was debt free and a further £3000 for the renovations was raised by mortgaging some

newly-acquired land at Dolbenmaen. Work began in 1730 and advice was sought from a top architect, Francis Smith of Warwick, whose bill came to £549. The whole family took an interest in the project and offered their comments, welcome or otherwise. Lewis Owen sent Mary some elaborate suggestions for a brewhouse and covered passage, incorporating a sketch of an arched colonnade:

If you think the Colonade too sumptuous you need only have a handsome wall of the same materials with the opposite side with pannels in it to answer to the windows and a vaulted underground passage into the cellar, as the Cloyster leads into the housekeepers room....All the members of the building are supposed to Correspond exactly with the Dairy and the wall or Cloyster which joins it to the house is to be built in such substantial workmanlike manner port holes for great guns that in case you should be besieged you may be sufficiently guarded on the side toward the mountains. In this building there will be room enough for a Cold and a hot bath & dressing Room and it's contriv'd so that Mrs Owen may go to it from her own Room along ...the Cloyster without going downstairs. There is likewise a Water Closet for the Ladies which I must own was very much wanting.²⁵

More than a decade later, in 1743, the renovations were still unfinished. Ellen Godolphin found William Owen's dilatory attitude thoroughly exasperating:

Mr Owen is one of the slow men of London; he ought to have been a Godolphin, always finding a knot in a Bullrush, not to have the gate made up in all this time; that and the best Stayers, I suppose if I should chance to live seven years I shall hear not finished; pray has the Sow and piggs privelage of running through the house still?²⁶

The Owen children.

William and Mary Owen produced seven children. The eldest son and heir was Robert Godolphin Owen, born in 1733, followed by two daughters, Margaret in 1738 and Ellen in 1740. A second son, Francis, to whom Lord Godolphin was godfather, arrived in 1743. There were two others who did not survive, Jane, born 1736, and Henry, whose death in 1747 left Mrs Owen profoundly depressed. The youngest member of the family was Mary, born in 1749. Robert Godolphin Owen ('Bobby') as a young child was playfully teased by his besotted mother, indulged alcohol by his father and closely monitored by the doting Godolphin relatives; it was no wonder he was a spoilt brat! Ellen Godolphin noticed:

...he loves nothing but himself; but...has left off kicking and cuffing; it is mended even to his Mamma & she is ashamed of her one folly, tho' she dose not one it.²⁷

At the age of eight, young Robert so resembled Mr Owen in looks that Sir Watkin Williams Wynn asked him whether he would also turn out as gruff as his father.²⁸ He was sent to school at Westminster, where the tedium of lessons was relieved by treats and outings with his Godolphin relatives:

Dear Mamma,.....I went to the Park yesterday and saw the King go to the Parliament House in a fine Coach drawn by eight Cream colured Horses. [and as a PS] I forgot to tell you I have been at the Tower to see the Lions and all the things.²⁹

His schooldays and his university years at Oxford were distinguished by a propensity for ruining his clothes and a lack of intellectual effort. Ellen Godolphin remarked tartly to Mrs Owen:

*I asked him how he liked Greek, prity well. Fathers own son never liked anything very well in his life; I hope he will his wife when he has one.*³⁰

Francis Godolphin observed the teenage behaviour with tolerant amusement:

*Bobby...seems to like his Aunt very well and casts many a Sheeps Eye at her when she does not look at him...*³¹

The harassed Ellen did her best to maintain reasonable discipline:

*He said last year, sure he was too big to be Govern'd by women.....I can assure you I take all the care I can to Govern without the appearance of Governing for that he will not take to...*³²

At Oriel College, Oxford, he enjoyed his freedom from the irksome relatives. To his parents he gave every impression of the dutiful son, breezily assuring them:

*Dear Mamma.....Now I have the pleasure of letting you know that I like Oxford extreemly well, & that I lead a very regular & happy life....Pray tell my Papa I have begun to study Logick, & hope to Understand it pretty well very soon.*³³

Amidst his colourful accounts of 'regular' university life, Robert described some true historical events, such as the trial and execution of Mary Blandy, and performances of Handel at a commemoration celebration in 1752:

*Dear Mamma.....On Wednesday The Messiah an Oratorio was perform'd in the Musick Room. On Thursday Morning was perform'd in the same Place Acis and Galatea, at two in the Evening.....On Friday was Performd in the Musick Room Israel in Egypt an Oratorio; There was a vast Deal of Company Present; it lasted 4 Hours.*³⁴

Bobby's sister, Margaret, was an intelligent child, advanced for her age and a favourite of her grandmother who remarked:

*We allways admired when she began to talk, how properly she spoke & never said a scily thing. I shall think you very worthy of her, if you keep her under & don't let her get the better of you, for she is to be reasoned into anything when she is out of her little passions.*³⁵

Like all the Owen children she had a good relationship with her mother and she inherited the love of music which was so prominent in the Godolphin family:

*Dear Mamma.....I like French much better than I thought I would for I can ask for what I want in French (and proceeded to prove it)....but musick is my delight; I can play 5 tunes with out Book and can play eney esy tune by Book.*³⁶

Margaret was no great beauty, the family acknowledged, yet her mother's good sense and training must have paid off. Just before her marriage to Owen Ormsby, a friend, J. Kynaston, wrote in admiration:

*...I know no Persons Taste so good as yours for Cloaths, Equipages or Furniture & take you to be one of the best of Managers & I am sure that you wou'd make one hundred Pd go farther than I can make two Hundred & I should not call you a Manager if you had not everything smart & genteel....*³⁷

Ellen Owen was the livewire of the family, a great favourite with her Uncle Francis, as this letter shows:

*Mr Go[odolphin] is sorry he was not there to Dance with Nelly; I am sure she would not have been a little proud of that.*³⁸ (She was about six years old at the time!)

All three of Mrs Owen's daughters attended a school for young ladies, Mrs Sheele's in London. Ellen's letters home revealed a typical mixture of affection and irritation towards her siblings:

*Dear Mamma....I am very glad Franky is going to Mr Sky's School; he is very wellcome to ride my Horse.....I suppose Punch is out of favour with my Sister & I fancy is hacked about now, tho' he was keep in order when my sister was at school because it was her horse & it was to be mine when the 2 years was over....*³⁹
and

*Dear Mamma....That book my sister took from me did not belong to her and pray tell her I will have it and she took a fan from me I believe, for I miss'd it soon after she went; I think I ought to keep her Necklace instead.*⁴⁰

The children, in common with many others, caught smallpox but escaped its worst effects. Ellen Owen wrote:

*Dear Mamma....I have the small Pox very thick in my face but there is no marks..... My nose is swell as big as the end of a house. I have got a bed chamber & a parlor to receive my company. My Aunt is always sending me sweetmeats - I name what I like.*⁴¹

In the virtual absence of dental hygiene the youngsters suffered rampant tooth decay. Both Francis and Margaret Owen underwent painful extractions:

*Dear Mamma.....I hope Franky has not suffer'd so much as I did for the man pul'd six times before he could get it out and broke my jaw at last...*⁴²

Francis Owen ('Franky') from the start was very different from his older brother. Far more a Godolphin in temperament, he displayed the scholarly application which Robert lacked. With laborious concentration he produced his first letters to his mother:⁴³

Der mamma
1770
BROOKLYN
PEL 5/9/103
i sink you for your letter nuch i resave
ister day but iam shori to heer that
my hors as not bin wel i hop that
the rabith are pritty wel and
that nun of then did di give my
savis to smoljon and tel him
to lock after them and give my
savis to patty and to citoy and to
miseth flode and give my savis
to maddom mery and give my
compliment to my elder sister
and give my duti pappa and
gve my savis to my brother
and give my savis to the chom
ond i wont no wethe you had that
letter which i wt to you last
your dutiful son
Francis Owen

Later at Eton, Francis was justifiably proud of his academic achievements:

Dear Mamma....I have got a Remove into the Upper Greek, and am Captain of all but six of the Lower School.....I like the Upper Greek a good deal beter than I did the Lower and I expect to be in the Upper School after next Hollidays⁴⁴

He shared his mother's interest in music and theatre, writing from London at Christmas in 1760:

*Dear Mamma...I was at a play last Monday night call'd the Minor and the Farce was the Guardian; I think I lik'd the Farce better than I did the Play. And on the Tuesday night I went to see a Comic Opera, called Il Mondo Della Luna, and I lik'd it very well.*⁴⁵

He spent the next summer at Baylies where, his uncle promised, he would be entertained but not spoiled:

*.... he will ride a little Horse with a long Tail and go a Fishing which will divert him, but he will not have Ten Pound given him to carry to School with him.*⁴⁶

Miss Mary Owen was the baby of the family and Aunt Ellen Godolphin observed her placid nature:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....Little Madam Mary is of a very easy disposition; she parted with her nurse with as much ease as her Maid.*⁴⁷

She shared a love of pets with another young friend, J. Kynaston of Hardwick:

*Dear Miss Mary.....At my return home I found an Animal here called a Rackoon; it's like a fox, a Dog, a Cat, & Claws like a Monkey. I hear its very good tempered, but I find no inclination to touch it, but like to look at it very much.*⁴⁸

When home from school, Mary was expected, in the manner of many a younger daughter, to entertain her father:

*Dear Mary....[instructed her mother] I hope you play at Draughts with your Pappa sometimes in an evening to divert one another.*⁴⁹

The Owen children had two cousins, John and Margaret, children of Lewis and Elizabeth Owen of Penrhos. John gave his Uncle William considerable worry, involving himself in hair-raising scrapes, a bad influence on his gullible cousin Robert. Ellen Godolphin recognised the signs of trouble early on:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....Master Jacky Owen is a Charming Boy, as wild as a Bird & that I am very against, if it is not turned to anything bad, & that I don't think he is.*⁵⁰

Margaret ('Peggy') Owen as a girl was pronounced by Francis Godolphin to be 'very hansom', although her prodigious appetite meant that in adulthood she became overweight. She was a cultured young woman, happiest with her friends, Henry and Hester Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi), and Charles and Fanny Burney.

Town and country

The Owens were part of the 'county set' in the Welsh borders, along with the Lloyds of Aston Hall, the Kynastons of Hardwick and the Wynns of Wynnstay. The gentlemen met in the spheres of local politics, the county courts, the agricultural sales and the hunting field. Failure in the Caernarvon borough elections of 1713 had deterred William Owen from standing for parliament again, but as a staunch Tory, he supported William Price, Richard Lyster and Sir Watkin Williams Wynn. In the

Caernarvonshire elections of 1747 he campaigned for Sir Thomas Prendergast so enthusiastically that Mrs Mostyn wrote to Mary Owen:

*I think electioneering has set Mr Owen upon the wing yet I wish he will not grow wild about the Hills so as you cannot easily Catch him again.*⁵¹

In London, his assiduous attentions to the candidate's wife gave rise to some unwelcome speculation! The behaviour of some gentry was indeed less than respectable and according to Mrs Mostyn,

*Mrs Pryce of Trewylan found her spouse in bed with the maid, the latter so fast asleep that she had much ado to wake her....*⁵²

The ladies enjoyed tea parties, card games and musical evenings. Mrs Kynaston specialised in 'wakes', or night-time parties, lit up with lanterns, and one of her invitations to Mrs Owen survives, written charmingly in verse.⁵³

The Owens were clearly hospitable to their own visitors, who included Emma Rowlands of Caerau (married name Bulkeley-Williams). She became a long-standing friend of Mary Owen, exchanging comfortable chit-chat and small confidences. Another friend was Ann Owen of Ynysmaengwyn, something of a 'drama queen' and a fount of all knowledge on the private lives of the Welsh gentry. She described the scene at Aberdyfi shortly after a shipwreck in 1746:

*The Custom House officers and the Port men quarreled; the former, knowing Anwyl to be a fighting noisy fellow sent for him there; he came with his cuttories, pistols and Guns; a hott engagement there was, the Port men had only stones for their weapons with which they pelted so fast that Anwyl and his army run a way.....Perhaps you never heard that last summer Anwyl shott at me on the high road whether to kill me or to frighten my horse to throw me down I cannot tell but he fail'd both.*⁵⁴

Ann's eldest son, extravagant and irresponsible, gave her a great deal of trouble and she frequently confided in Mary:

*....Corbett Owen has destroyed me long since yet I am very sure he was much inclined to return to his duty but that his wife would not let him submit to it. I believe there is not in the world so great a shrew as she is.*⁵⁵

The Owens' social life was centred mainly in their immediate locality and one of their great pleasures was to attend the Wynnstay theatre. Long after Mrs Owen had left Oswestry, a friend kept her informed on the latest performances:

*Sir Watkin being summon'd to London, We had only four nights Plays: The Tragedy was very well perform'd....After the Saturday Night's play, Sir Watkin supp'd with his company & then sett out to attend his parliamentary duty, on Monday the 12th instant.*⁵⁶

Away from home, friends and relatives kept Mrs Owen up to date with the news. Her mother's letters from Eton were filled with sensible advice, warm compassion and intriguing gossip about the school staff and prominent church members. From

London Mary's sister-in-law, Barbara Godolphin, described the marriage of the Princess Royal to the Prince of Orange in 1734:

*The P[rince]ss R[oyal] followed dressed in silver tissue stiffen'd body'd gown trimmed with silver, a purple mantle & a Crown of Jewels, supported by her two Brothers both going to the Chapell & coming back.*⁵⁷

Ellen Godolphin missed nothing and her letters were crammed with observations on those who inhabited or visited the capital: the Duchesses of Newcastle, Leeds and Marlborough (all Godolphins by birth or marriage), the Evelyns, the Williams-Wynns and many more whose identities can only be guessed at:

*and some wicked people say my Lord is married to an old piece of stuff that he has kept a great while, & others before him...*⁵⁸

Living in proximity to central London, Ellen was also in a position to observe royalty, with their all-too-human failings:

*The Princes[s] of Hess.....I can't say she is as prity as she was, very thin, fine and ill Dresst, but the latter is her own fault, for she thrusts her fingers into her hare as soon as done and slackens it all.*⁵⁹

During the 1740s, the Jacobite Rebellion lurked constantly in the background of everyone's lives. There is no doubt as to which side Ellen Godolphin supported, but she sought to reassure her niece:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....I am extremely glad you have no fears...indeed I fancy you are very safe & that the really point is as London & if they come I hope we shall give the Rebels a warm reception.*⁶⁰

She was elated at the news of the Culloden victory in April 1746:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....to wish you joy of our Gorgeous Duke having defeated the Enemy of this Kingdom.....the whole town was in such transports that I never saw, bonfires & Eleumination, the whole Evening money flying, Bells ringing, Bear and Wine Drinking....all my Iorn rales was stuck with Candles as was all my Neighbours; Mrs R.W. chose to have her Windows broke; Sir Watt[kin] gave money none of his neighbours light up....I am told £500 will not repair the damage...*⁶¹

Her enthusiasm must have seemed a little tactless to her recipient, since William Owen's father had been considerably sympathetic to the Jacobite cause!

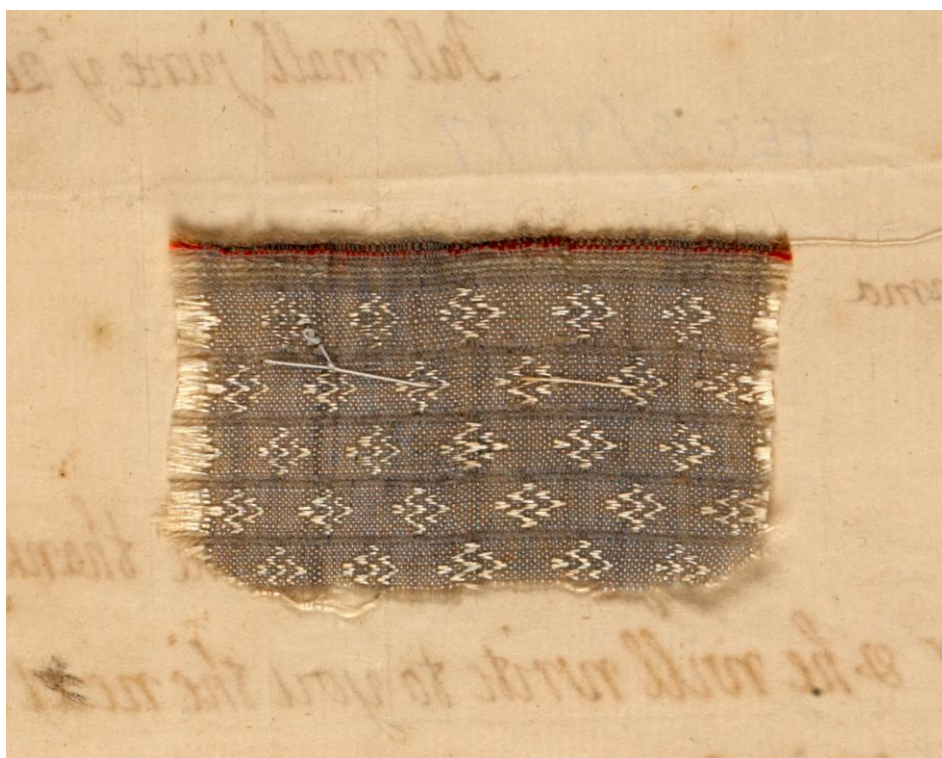
Francis Godolphin MP kept his sister informed on parliamentary news, reporting in December 1747:

Yesterday was the last Day of Petitions and I have sent you a List of them on the other Leaf.....The Parliament have Voted the Seamen and yesterday the Army, the same numbers as last year, there was no division and not much Debate, everybody agreeing that we are in a very bad way and now we are in for it we cannot go back. Mr

*Pelham and Mr Pitt cleared themselves from having been instrumental in Bringing the War to Flanders and said they were always against it.*⁶²

Although she remained far from the capital, Mrs Owen maintained a lively interest in London fashion. Her mother and Aunt Ellen Godolphin reported on the latest styles and they went to some trouble on her behalf to obtain laces, kid gloves and lengths of fabric. Her daughter, Ellen, appreciated sartorial elegance at an early age:

Dear Mamma.....I have got a new gown and have sent you a bit of it to see how you like it & would have sent you a bit of my spring Gown but could not show you the patern without cutting a great pi[e]ce of it



Ellen Owen's dress fabric⁶³

Sickness and health

As mistress of a large house, Mary Owen supervised the housekeeper, cook and other servants. In the course of her domestic duties, she collected numerous recipes. Delicacies intended for the Brogyntyn dining room included: apricot jelly, plum pudding, cheese cakes, orange wine, apples stewed *the Portugal Way*, Pillow of Veal, gooseberry cream or lemon cream.⁶⁴ Mr Owen was said to be fond of fish.⁶⁵ Among the household recipes were instructions for making soap, ink and furniture polish:

*To clean mahogany, a polish made from linseed oil, alkanet root and rose pink, to be applied with a linen cloth; to remove ink stains from the same, use spirit of salt or lemon juice, salt and sweet oil.*⁶⁶

When you weren't feeling too well:

*A spoonfull of the best vinegar, a spoonfull of good sweet oyle and a pennyworth of Lethergie of gould beaten well together, an excellent oyntment for the Hemorides.*⁶⁷

There were many other treatments for dropsy, colic, convulsions and worms, as well as veterinary medicines for the animals. The effects of a rich diet and excess alcohol were felt almost universally by the upper classes of the eighteenth century. Gout and urinary tract disorders seemed to be the most common ailments, as Ellen Godolphin complained to Mary Owen:

*I find one spoonfull of Honey enough & I shall try more Oyl; it is a vast deal of gravel I part with & my poor back pays for it.*⁶⁸

For most minor illnesses people purged themselves with ‘physic’ or emetics, the effects of which can be imagined! The universal remedy for any ague or fever was ‘the bark’ - probably willow bark, a source of salicylic acid, similar in its composition to aspirin. Mr Owen himself was not exempt from indisposition caused by overindulgence, much to the disgust of Mrs Godolphin:

*Dear Mrs Owen.....I hope Mr Owen is recovered his last drinking bout. I am very much vexed [by] it, and I suppose he will bring himself to a Bath journey if he does not take more care of himself.*⁶⁹

Regular visits to Bath were undertaken by the wealthy, supposedly for the therapeutic spa waters but, one suspects, also for the gaiety of the social scene, which offered an endless choice of card parties, dances and concerts, amidst glittering company adorned in the latest fashions.

While illness destroyed some members of the family, others met their ends through old age or gruesome accidents. Ellen Godolphin was living in London when she made her will in 1754. She was probably in her sixties when she died, leaving her money, pictures and silver to Francis Godolphin, Mary Owen and other members of the family. Margaret Godolphin died a tired old woman in 1766, dividing her Montgomeryshire and Shropshire estates between Mary and Francis respectively. Mrs Owen’s accounts listed the lavish funeral trappings and black silk mourning clothes, no expense spared.⁷⁰ The memorials to Madam Godolphin showed the respect in which she had been held: a coat of arms at Abertanat, inscriptions on the Godolphin and Tanat monuments, and flagstones for Llanyblodwel church.

William Owen died in 1767 at the age of eighty two. He had prudently made his will five years previously, in which Mary was referred to as *my Dear Wife* and the family was well provided for. A fascinating array of goods was left at Brogyntyn after the master’s decease. As well as furnishings, groceries and garden tools, there were:

5 vols of Baronets
History of the Revolution
Pamela 2 vols
The Compleat Cook
Family Physician
Lovel’s Herbal
English Gardene

Life of Queen Elizabeth
 and many other books.
 The farm stock and horses included
a Dun Mare
a Chestnut ditto, one Eye
a Grey Gelding
Old blue Gelding
 and tack.
 In the house there remained fabrics:
3 pieces of Scarlett flowered Tissue
1 Remnant of Green flowered Velvet
1 Remnant of Blue and Orange Silk
 and interesting trinkets:
1 Shaving folding Glass
1 Ivory Case with Paint Brushes
1 Gold Embroidered Purse
2 pair of Spectacles with Shag[reen] Cases
A Child's Knife and Fork in a Case
 as well as snuff boxes, rings and silver buckles.⁷¹

Francis Owen, godson and heir of Uncle Francis Godolphin, had begun a promising career in politics. Sadly he met with a fatal riding accident in 1774, shortly after his selection to represent the Cornish borough of Helston. Robert Godolphin Owen was convinced that he would then become the Godolphin heir and a story circulated that he danced gleefully on his brother's grave. Whether the tale was true or not, Uncle Francis was not impressed with his nephew and he left the bulk of his fortune to other relatives. Ellen Owen received £12000, while Robert had only £1000. Robert Godolphin Owen inherited the Brogyntyn estate and carried on much as his father had done, dutifully filling the posts of High Sheriff of Merioneth and Caernarvonshire, running his estate from day to day, and probably succumbing to the effects of drink. The spoilt, high-spirited youth had become a middle-aged eccentric bachelor, John Owen's *crazy cousin of Porkington*, or *a whimsical pleasant mortal* as the Ladies of Llangollen called him.⁷² As far back as 1745 Ellen Godolphin had said of him:

*His great excellence is burning his Cloaths.*⁷³

That was his ultimate fate in 1792, burned to death when his shirt caught fire at Llanddyn, the family's Llangollen home.

Miss Mary Owen, the youngest daughter, must have died some time before 1774, because she was not mentioned in her mother's will. Margaret Owen married Owen Ormsby in 1777 and their daughter, Mary Jane, heiress to Brogyntyn, married William Gore, thus beginning the Ormsby-Gore family. Ellen Owen lived with her mother in southern England after her father's death. Interestingly, she appears to have given assistance to French emigrants who fled to Britain, 1795-1801, but lack of time has prevented me from following that line of enquiry.⁷⁴ Ellen remained a spinster and died in 1802.

Following her husband's death, Mary Owen had moved to Datchet, nearer to her brother, Francis. When she made her will in 1774, she was staying in the family's

London house in Conduit Street, Westminster. Of her children only Robert, Margaret and Ellen were still alive. She died ten years later, in 1784, leaving keepsakes to her remaining family.



Lock of Mary Owen's hair⁷⁵

Although of distinguished Godolphin ancestry, Mary Owen lived in comparative obscurity. She never became well-known outside of her own social circle and after her marriage she rarely left Brogyntyn. Preferring to spend her time with family and friends, she was clearly a dutiful wife, a generous hostess and, to her well-loved children, a very Dear Mama.

Footnotes

1. For a fuller history of the Brogyntyn Estate see Archives Network Wales website, <http://www.archivesnetworkwales>
2. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED2/2/18.
3. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED2/2/32.
4. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED2/2/36.
5. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC3/3/27.
6. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED1/3/3.
7. Portrait of Henry Godolphin in Dimont, Elisabeth, *Godolphin Family Portraits* (Salisbury 1987), p. 14.
8. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/10.
9. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/43.
10. Portrait of William Owen, NLW, framed works of art, slide no. 2736.

11. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED2/2/38.
12. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC3/4/7.
13. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/76.
14. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC1/9/11.
15. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC3/3/29.
16. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/2.
17. NLW, Welsh probate records, SA1754/151.
18. Picture: Howard, Betty, 'Brogyntyn Hall - The End of an Era' in *Country Quest* (Feb. 2006, pp. 28-29).
19. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/6/5.
20. Ibid.[?Italics]
21. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, EH2/1.
22. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, EH3/3.
23. Gresham, Colin A., *Eifionydd: A Study in Landownership from the Medieval Period to the Present Day* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), pp. 97-100.
24. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, L2/118.
25. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/1. The colonnade in the sketch bears a strong resemblance to the garden feature at Aberglasney, Carmarthenshire, clearly reflecting the contemporary architectural trend.
26. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/23.
27. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PED2/2/48.
28. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/6/41.
29. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/53.
30. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/52.
31. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/39.
32. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/94.
33. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/54.

34. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/60.
35. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/6/28.
36. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/28.
37. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC6/4/17.
38. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/87.
39. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/76.
40. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/81.
41. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/100-101.
42. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/10/27.
43. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/103.
44. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/108-109.
45. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/113.
46. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/99.
47. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/173.
48. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC6/1/1.
49. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC6/1/12.
50. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/144.
51. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/8/60.
52. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/8/64.
53. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PQH1/4.
54. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/8.
55. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/10.
56. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/7/67.
57. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/2/3.
58. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/14.

59. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/88.
60. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/56.
61. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/64.
62. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/61.
63. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/9/77.
64. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, EH4.
65. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/4/90.
66. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, EH4/2.
67. Ibid. [*Italics*]
68. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/3.
69. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/6/36.
70. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, N1/10.
71. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PBB1/6.
72. Williams, Elinor Namora, 'The Brogyntyn Family – A Social Study' (unpublished master's thesis, School of Celtic Studies, University of Liverpool, 1951), ref. NLW Ex. 1649, pp. 207-8.
73. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC5/3/52.
74. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PEC6/5.
75. NLW, Brogyntyn Estate and Family Records, PPA2/9.

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Hilary A Peters

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