

## The Destruction of the Gwynnes of Garth

### Introduction

Several years after the Gwynne family of Garth first captured my imagination, I had the pleasure of visiting the old family seat which still stands amidst modest parkland not far from Builth in northern Breconshire. At a glance it appears now to be little more than a grand old farmstead, but once inside, the antiquity of the house is immediately apparent. I was led by the present owners to the room where the preacher Charles Wesley was nursed back to health by Miss Gwynne almost 300 years ago. Passing through rooms of stately proportions I climbed the burly oak staircase which, lit by a fine Venetian window, sung of the rich history of this 17<sup>th</sup> century mansion house. Garth may have survived in a remarkable condition but the Gwynne family was less fortunate. The Garth estate never ranked amongst the greatest Welsh estates, but by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it certainly had all the ingredients of a wealthy and influential seat. And its residents were a family on the rise. However, as dramatic as their rise was their rapid demise. Within a hundred years much of the estate was in chancery and an irreversible downturn in family fortunes had been set in motion.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it was common for Welsh estates to change hands – ancient bloodlines ended and smaller estates were absorbed by larger ones, but historians often describe this period of time as the golden age of the gentry, when their power, status and impunity was at its height. It was not until the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the county families of Wales began to feel the weight of social and political reform, which gradually brought about an end to their dominance, and a great reduction in their wealth. Yet, it was during these boom years, whilst the families at Tredegar, Crosswood and Golden Grove flourished, that the family at Garth sank in to financial ruin.

Here we have a rare opportunity to chronicle the downfall of an influential gentrified family during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in some considerable detail. Documents in the Dolaucothi collection and the vast, largely uncatalogued, G. E. Owen collection at the National Library not only shed light on the several reasons for this fall from power, but perhaps more importantly, they allow us a glimpse into the family's personal affairs as they desperately tried to keep above the tide of destruction.

### **The rise to prominence**

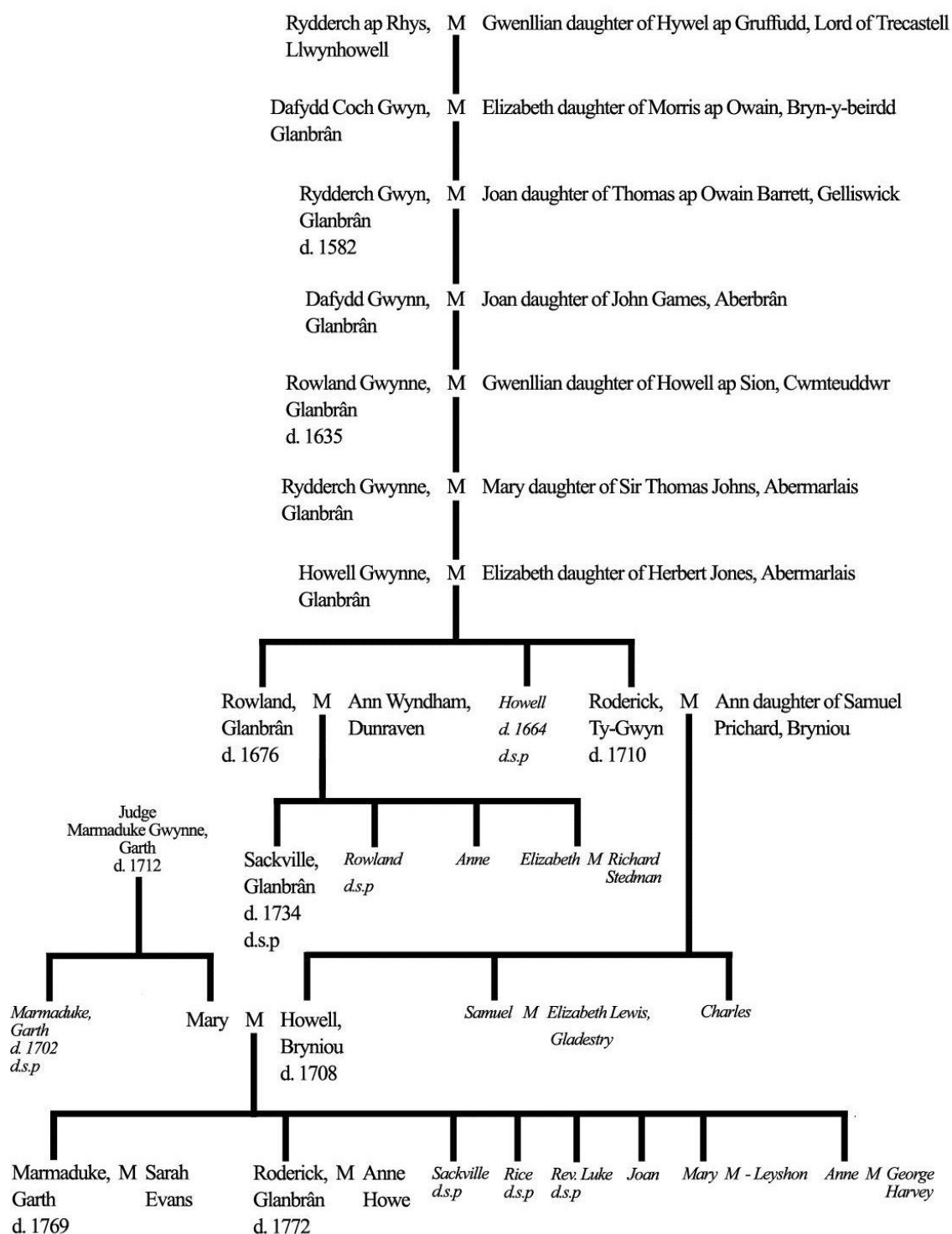
The Garth estate emerged during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when an old family of Maesllech in Llanllywenfel, Builth moved to neighbouring Garth. Much of the current house was probably built at this time. The first of the family known to have settled at Garth was Rees Gwyn, coroner of Brecknock. His son Marmaduke Gwynne pursued a career in law climaxing with his appointment as the Second Justice of Anglesey. The art of the judicious marriage was well executed by this family and the judge is said to have had £20,000 from his marriage to Mary Gwilim of Glasgwm. He was certainly able to invest heavily in land and property, building a firm foundation for a much enlarged estate. His purchase of the Manor of Builth from Sir Thomas Williams was achieved almost entirely through trickery, deception and betrayal. As Sir Thomas' agent for the estate he depreciated the value of the property and exaggerated difficulties in collecting the chief rents. The claims were supported by his father Rees Gwyn who repeatedly appeared as foreman of the jury at the local court leet. The duped knight was eventually induced to sell the manor to his creditors, at which point Gwynne seized the whole for himself. By the time of his death in 1712 he owned almost the entire Hundred of Builth.

The Judge's only daughter married Howell Gwynne of Bryniou, Llanafan Fawr. Howell Gwynne was of a cadet branch of the very wealthy Gwynne's of Glanbrân near

Llandovery. Thus the two powerful 'Gwynne' families of South Wales were united. When the Judge's only son died without issue in 1702 he bequeathed the entire estate to his daughter's eldest son Marmaduke Gwynne (1691-1769). The progress made by this Marmaduke was remarkable. Upon the death of his father in 1708 he inherited the modest Bryniou estate and lands in Radnorshire. This was absorbed into the Garth estate upon the death of his grandfather in 1712. He inherited the Garth estate on sound financial footing, the Judge having left no debts to speak of. His will even made generous provisions for his grandson's 'better advancement and preferment in marriage'<sup>1</sup>. This enabled the young squire to attract a wealthy heiress to Garth. His marriage to Sarah Evans of Peterwell certainly satisfied his grandfather's will as it won him a Pembrokeshire estate said at the time to be worth £30,000<sup>2</sup>.

When the male line at Glanbrân also failed in 1734, Marmaduke Gwynne of Garth became the natural heir. However, some deal was struck, which has never been fully explained, whereby the majority of that estate passed to his younger brother Roderick. It was probably at his time that the Llanelwedd estate also came under Marmaduke's control. Had he succeeded to Glanbrân his combined estate would have been one of the country's largest. As it was, the two brothers between them controlled vast swathes of South and Mid Wales. The two families flourished, holding many important offices. At Glanbrân the old hall was torn down and a grand new house was built at great expense. However, the golden age of Garth (and Glanbrân) was not to last. Within 100 years both estates had been sold.

## The Descent of the Gwynnes of Glanbrân and Garth



## **Howell Gwynne and his heir**

It was the aforementioned Marmaduke Gwynne (1691-1769) who was turned to Methodism by Howell Harris. A good deal has already been said about him in a previous article<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say, for much of Marmaduke's life the Garth estate provided in abundance, and the family maintained a luxurious lifestyle. They kept a chaplain and 20 servants, and seldom entertained fewer than 15 guests<sup>4</sup>.

In 1741 Marmaduke's eldest son and heir Howell Gwynne married Dame Mary Rudd, the widow of Sir John Rudd of Aberglasney, paving the way for the beginnings of the power transfer from father to son. It is after Howell Gwynne took control that we first notice cracks appearing in the fabric of the estate.

Howell Gwynne was in many ways the prodigal son. In stark contrast to his father's methodical moderation he was ambitious and headstrong with a wild temper. He made several failed investments and had seemingly little grasp on his own finances. Correspondence from the time tells of bitter disputes with his family over their irregular association with Methodists like Howell Harris. He was particularly obtrusive in his protest against the wedding of his sister Sally to the Rev. Charles Wesley. Furthermore, he associated himself with infamous scoundrels such as his cousin Sir Herbert Lloyd of Peterwell and the mining agent John Paynter of Hafod. He had a particular fondness for Mr Paynter whom he employed to assist him with a mining venture. However, even Paynter with all his cruel eccentricities was somewhat dumbstruck when the impulsive squire of Garth came staggering up to Esgair Mwyn in the Cardiganshire wilderness one summer's evening, unannounced and utterly intoxicated. He was so amused by the spectacle that he saw fit to send an account to his master, Lord Powys.

*'...Just as I was going to roost the other night (for I go to bed with the cocks and hens) who should come in, half seas over, but Mr Howell Gwynn of Garth, with a number of servants – I never was so distressed and confounded in my life. (for he told me at first he was come to stay the night) having no sort of bed to offer him but that which I lay in myself. However I did pretty well; I got into a Moch loft for a few ours and put him to rest and came of the next morning with flying colours. He expressed great astonishment at entertainment he so unexpectedly met with in my little hutt'<sup>5</sup>*

Gwynne's flippant nature was evident to both his friends and his foes. His political and business adversaries also bore the full force of his heavy handedness. One such adversary was the entrepreneur, Chauncey Townsend. Unlike Gwynne, he enjoyed great success in business, having established successful mining and smelting ventures in the booming industrial town of Swansea. His knowledge of the industry earned him the respect of many of the Cardiganshire Gentry. However, when he offered Lord Powys the use of his furnace and coal, in order to smelt the precious ore from Esgair Mwyn, Howell Gwynne was furious, having conspired with his cousin Mr Popkin – a coal merchant – to sell their coal to Lord Powys for the same purpose. Howell's letters to Lord Powys, urging him against Townsend's services were full of slander and distortion, and Powys duly observed that they felt rather 'Cold'<sup>6</sup>. The matter rattled on for years, and Howell was as defiant as ever in 1760 when Lord Powys wrote of him:

*'...I shall be very glad to serve him, if he would enable me to do it, in a right manner:- but to attempt it improperly, as I should do it at present...with so much enmity and resentment between him and the other Gentlemen, could not become me, in my station in life'<sup>7</sup>*

In this case Howell's hot headed and tactless behaviour led to the failure of his bid. In contrast, the ambitious Townsend went on to manage several successful mining ventures in the area. Howell Gwynne went on to pin all his hopes on his own mining venture. He employed John Paynter to prospect for lead at a site called Nant-y-car, high in the Radnorshire hills. Gwynne was convinced that the mine could be a success, bestowing great riches upon his family. Privately though, Paynter was less enthusiastic about the success of the scheme. In a letter to Lord Powys he wrote:

*'The mine work which has so often and so much roused expectations of the family at Garth, continues still to produce nothing but hope'<sup>8</sup>*

For more than ten years Howell ploughed money into the venture. He took on partners, including his father and his brother Duke, drawing ever more money from the family fortune, but his men were not able to find the promised vein of ore and the mine never made any money in his time. At that time the lead mines of mid Wales rarely yielded any decent profit for their gentrified owners, and many more prudent gentleman, such as Thomas Johnes had long given up on funding mining ventures, choosing instead, to lease the land to more skilled prospectors. A significant vein of lead was eventually found at Nant-y-car, but not until long after the Gwynnes had given it up as a costly failure.

Howell Gwynne clearly had many failings but his position as one of the principal landowners in Brecon and Radnor saw him rise to prominence. In 1753 he had failed dramatically in his bid to take the Radnor parliamentary seat. At a public meeting, before a less than satisfactory turnout, Howell Gwynne declared that the sitting member, Sir Humphrey Howorth, had promised to stand aside in his favour at the next election, to which Sir Humphrey reacted angrily, denying having made any such promise. The pair then

proceeded to quarrel publicly<sup>9</sup>. Gwynne was forced to withdraw but when Howorth died in February 1755 he finally muscled his way into the seat, much to the disappointment of his enemies. On the eve of his appointment Thomas Morgan of Tredegar complained to a friend of the 'ill usage that Mr Gwynne and his family has given to...Sir Humphrey and his family'. Morgan continued his critique in witty verse:

*'Least my former Epistle should happen to miss  
I have sent you my thoughts, Sir, by this post, in this.  
Our Antagonist Gwynne is a very sad fellow  
For he laughs and he jokes both when sober and mellow.  
How he dealt with Sir Humphrey you very well know  
I'll ever resent it and hope you likewise so.  
Now if my folks and your folks and mine  
Wou'd in interest and politics closely combine  
My most ardent wishes would then come to pass  
Being I am with true Love your Trusty Thomas'<sup>10</sup>*

Despite making an enemy of the powerful Morgan family, Howell Gwynne had been identified as the powerhouse in Radnorshire, which won him the backing of Lords Bateman and Powys. Thus he was appointed Lord Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum of Radnorshire in 1756, a position usually reserved for the aristocracy and the very richest gentrified families. Indeed, James Brydges, Marquess of Carnarvon was enraged that Gwynne had effective control of the county and complained to the prime minister:

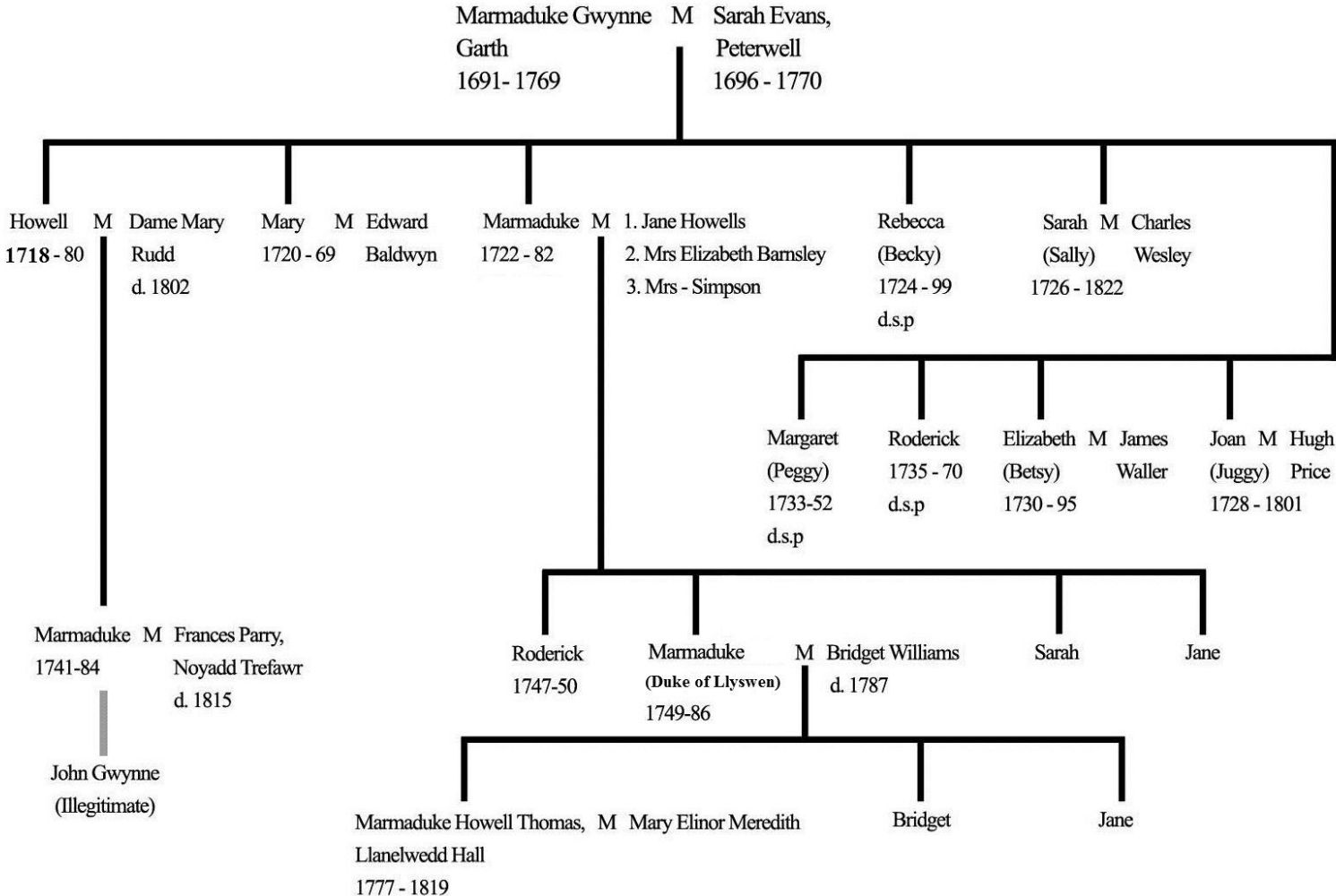


*'If it is more for his Majesty's Honour and Service to have Mr Gwynne at the head of that County than Myself: I am very well content: but I may be able in a future election to shew that that gentleman is not unanimously supported by the gentleman of the county...'*<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately for Gwynne, Carnarvon's friendship with George III would eventually force him from power. In the interim his heightened status highlights the respect that the family now demanded, but it did little to change his ways or reverse his waning fortunes.

The actions of Howell Gwynne's only son and heir Marmaduke were to further blacken the outlook facing the Gwynne family of Garth. By the 1760s he was a young man in his 20s. Together with his father, his reckless spending, unchecked borrowing and naïve estate management ensured the failure of the estate. The first indications of trouble could be seen even whilst the old Methodist was still alive. In the mid-1760s a small mortgage was raised on the estate by Howell Gwynne. His elderly parents reluctantly moved from their Brecon town house to Bryniou in order to economise and in June of 1768 they set about letting the Llanelwedd estate (Part of their Glanbrân inheritance) . But the indenture was never implemented and their heir, Howell, soon set his eyes on Llanelwedd as his own residence.<sup>12</sup>

### The Descent of the Gwynnes of Garth and Llanelwedd



## **The beginning of the end**

The watershed for the family's success came when control of Radnorshire was wrestled from Howell Gwynne by the more powerful Marquess of Carnarvon. This slip from power began at the election of 1761 when pressure from both the Marquess and the King of England forced Gwynne out of his parliamentary seat. In a letter to a friend, Carnarvon wrote:

*'I caught the Duke of Newcastle yesterday before he had left St. James's. I acquainted Him that His Majesty had given me leave to offer myself as a candidate for the County of Radnor and had permitted me to acquaint His Grace therewith and to beg His Countenance and assistance. The Duke told me that Lord Bateman, Mr Rice and Mr Gwynne had been with Him that morning and...assured Him that the County was engaged in Favour of Mr Gwynne and that I cou'd not possibly have any Chance...I told His Grace...that Mr. Gwynne must have a very extraordinary opinion of me to imagine that I should give up my Pretensions to the County, on his assuring me I cou'd not carry my Point...'*<sup>13</sup>

After many meetings and discussions, Gwynne, his supporters, and the Prime minister came to a deal with Carnarvon. Gwynne agreed to give up his Radnorshire seat on the proviso that he was installed elsewhere free of charge. Thus he was installed as M.P. for an obscure Wiltshire borough using secret service funds. As for his Lord Lieutenancy, he refused to bow to the Marquess. His Sponsor, Lord Powys, wrote to the Prime Minister defending his faithful servant:

*'Giving up the Lieutenancy would be giving up the power of the county out of his hands! His friends would never forgive it!'*<sup>14</sup>.

As a result another deal was reached allowing Howell to keep his Royal office for five more years, on the condition that it would then be given to Carnarvon. And so, by 1770 Gwynne had been stripped of his office, and he no longer commanded enough support to stand as a Member of Parliament. Never again would the family enjoy such a lofty position in society.

Still, all was not lost. It would now fall upon Howell Gwynne's only son and heir to rescue the family's waning fortunes. In 1770 the Gentleman's Magazine informed its readers that young Marmaduke of Garth was to marry to the widow Mrs Frances Parry of Hannam Hall in Gloucestershire and Noyadd near Cardigan. The marriage brought young Gwynne the Noyadd estate – a handsome dowry apparently worth £70,000. The marriage was advertised as a means of overcoming any financial worries that faced the family. However, the Parrys soon found themselves caught in the Gwynnes web of debt.

Howell Gwynne's parents were now dead, placing him at the head of the family. He made Llanelwedd his principal residence and relinquished the whole of the Garth estate 'in order to proffer his son in marriage'<sup>15</sup>. Although Llanelwedd was a much smaller estate, the elegant 16<sup>th</sup> century seat was an improvement on Garth House and it became one of the few safe havens for the family over the coming decades. They recognised that it could be managed and maintained with far greater ease than the expansive Garth estate and as time passed they became increasingly determined not to let it slip through their fingers.

Father and son were now racking up enormous bills with their many creditors and by 1772 they were faced with crippling joint debts of more than £24,000. Young Marmaduke's original marriage settlement was altered and his mother in law's jointure reduced, allowing extra funds to be released. A mortgage of £15,000 was raised on the Noyadd estate (an estate valued at around £21,000). In a letter to Charles Wesley in February 1772, Howell's brother Duke wrote:

*'The £15,000 has long been said to be ready; but my poor brother, by rascality somewhere, is still kept out of it: I left him yesterday in a bad state of health, greatly impaired by troubles and disappointments. He expects daily to have it paid in, and, I hope it cannot be far off. I know little of its destination, having no curiosity in that respect'*<sup>16</sup>

But if the loan was intended to free Howell Gwynne and his family of their financial woes then they were gravely mistaken. The loan proved drastically insufficient, and the family was unable to even meet the interest repayments. This in turn led to the Noyadd estate being placed in receivership, so that the Gwynnes would henceforth have no profit from it.

During these darkening times one notable family stood by Howell Gwynne and his son. The Johnes brothers of Croft Castle and Dolaucothi were distant relations, and with kinship came loyalty. But as time wore on even they began to lose patience with the neglectful heirs of Garth and became anxious to recover money they themselves were owed. In October 1773 an old and miserable Howell Gwynne grovelled to Captain Johnes of Dolaucothi:

*'Nothing is more irksome to me than to distress or disappoint anyone and more particularly my friend in which class I sincerely rank you, but the feelings undergo by the delays and indolence of my son and his ways almost drive me mad'*<sup>17</sup>

Unable even to satisfy his closest friends, Howell places the blame squarely on his son. The evidence certainly suggests that young Marmaduke was quite the spendthrift, at a time when the family desperately needed to rein in its expensive habits. Much like the rest of the family he was raised in lavish settings quite detached from the brutality of the real world. Family correspondences reveal his weakness for liquor<sup>18</sup> and his habit of spending a good deal of his

time in London, where he no doubt dabbled at the gambling tables and immersed himself in other costly pursuits. He once wrote to Captain Johnes of Dolaucothi from London; 'Money is a necessary ingredient in this metropolis'<sup>19</sup>.

His wife Frances never bore him any children, providing a platform for bitter disputes and long legal battles about the future ownership of the Garth estate. As long as Howell's son remained heirless, it was his cousin Duke of Llyswen (the son of Howell Gwynne's brother Marmaduke) who stood to inherit the Garth and Llanellwedd estate. Matters were further complicated by the appearance Marmaduke Gwynne's illegitimate son. The child, known as John or Jack Gwynne, was baptised at Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn in 1760, where the parish register simply describes him as the child of Mary Davies and Marmaduke Gwynne of Garth. What became of the mother is unknown but she is never mentioned in later correspondence. We can therefore only guess at the circumstances of this child's conception.

By January 1775 matters had reached crisis point. 'The Gwynne's must soon raise money to pay everybody' wrote Thomas Johnes to his brother at Dolaucothi,

*'and I met young [Marma]Duke at Hereford upon that account, they are very unaccountable otherwise they had long since done so and saved their...reputation'<sup>20</sup>.*

Johnes spent a good deal of time writing to billers on behalf of Howell and his son in order to 'prevent escalations' but even he was at a loss to see how matters could finally be settled.

### **Money matters**

The family's social habits and lack of business acumen undoubtedly played their part in the worsening financial situation, but to fully appreciate the extent of their problems we must examine the state of their accounts.

In the spring of 1775 a conveyance of trust was drawn up, in which the young heir relinquished control of the entire estate to his designated trustees so that money could be raised through sale and mortgage, to pay their debts.

*'The said Marmaduke Gwynne hath agreed to convey release and assign all and every his manors messuages lands tenements hereditaments and personal estate'.<sup>21</sup>*

All his property, horses, livestock and household goods were placed in the care of his newly appointed trustees: Thomas Johnes of Croft Castle, his uncle the Rev. Hugh Price and the Hereford solicitors Parry and Lachmere. The trustees were tasked with raising more than £10,000 in order to satisfy a long list of creditors. And the appointed receiver for the estate was a Carmarthen solicitor named Herbert Lloyd, whose papers survive in the G.E. Owen collection. When the Gwynnes recovered the estate in 1779 it was valued at £60,000 and Marmaduke, the young heir, was saddled with mortgage repayments of over £7000 a year. His father, too, had to pay half that again. Despite the sale of farms, land and timber whilst the estate was in the hands of the trustees, father and son now had debts totalling £24,432 and so the Gwynnes situation had only worsened<sup>22</sup>. For a family who owned over 100,000 acres of land and three sizeable country seats (Garth, Llanelwedd and Noyadd) this should not have been cause for panic. The Crosswood estate had only half the land, and raised a rental income of £11,000 a year. In contrast, the figures for the Garth and Llanelwedd estates look poor. A Report of their finances in 1781 paints a grim outlook. Yearly rentals amounted to £2063.1.4 and it was noted that the buildings thereon were in a poor state of repair. It should also be said that despite the huge size of the Garth estate, only around five thousand acres was arable. The rest was unproductive and unenclosed mountain pasture.

The rentals of their Pembrokeshire estates came to £620 and the report states that “the rents thereof hath not been raised in the memory of man”<sup>23</sup>. The shortfall between the family’s rental income and their mortgage repayments was staggering. With such limited income it was becoming inevitable that large parts of the estate would have to be sold.

Overspending was one issue, but another important factor was the more long term mismanagement of the estate. Farms and cottages had been allowed to fall into disrepair and rents had not been raised in years. This stagnated or reduced rental income and lowered the mortgage value of their estates. For example, some 80 years earlier Sir Rowland Gwynne is said to have had an income of £1000 a year from the Llanelwedd estate alone, only to ‘spent all in a few years by eating and rioting’<sup>24</sup>.

The final factor at play was the wider economic situation at the time. A spate of bad weather had led to a series of poor crops, compounding difficulties in collecting rents, and the plight of the poor had scarcely been worse, especially in Pembrokeshire. This naturally depressed the price of land. After attending a sale at Builth in 1778 Thomas Johnes reported:

*“It was thought they cou’d not sell a single tenement, but at a very low rate, there never was such a time for selling, I don’t think any land worth above 20 years purchase”*<sup>25</sup>

Sadly for the Gwynnes, they had no choice but to sell at a greatly reduced price. The report of 1781 makes it clear to all that the family was in dire straits. The final paragraph was a stark warning to both the Gwynnes and their creditors:

*“If the creditors do not soon form some certain and practicable mode for the Assignee to the trust to pursue with satisfaction...his future conduct must be governed by the Court of Chancery and in such case, Mr Gwynne must be confined to goal, which will shorten his days. If he dies there will not be a shilling left to pay his debts”*<sup>26</sup>



## **Exile**

The fortunes of the estate had been turned on their head in just 30 years, and now the future looked grim indeed. No deal could be reached with Gwynnes creditors, and so Prison became a very real possibility. As such, young Marmaduke turned his back on Garth and fled to Lille in Flanders, where he hoped to escape incarceration. He would never again return to Breconshire. In due course the elderly Howell Gwynne was himself forced to flee and, for a time, not even his trustees knew of his whereabouts. 'I cannot imagine what has become of Howell Gwynne. He certainly is prudent in quitting the country'<sup>27</sup> wrote Thomas Johnes. It seems likely that he went to Lille for a time to stay with his son.

Whilst Marmaduke and his father were abroad, it was his illegitimate son, John Gwynne who took up residence, first at Garth and later at Llanelwedd. Gwynne used his son to protect his interests back home. He was expected to follow orders from the rest of the family, and he worked closely with the chancery-appointed receiver Herbert Lloyd of Carmarthen. However, with no legitimate heir, and constantly in poor health it seemed almost inevitable that Marmaduke Gwynne's estates would become the inheritance of his cousin, Duke of Llyswen. Duke had married Bridget Williams, a niece of Anne Williams, wife of the late Howell Harris, connecting the family, through marriage, to both the Wesleys and the Welsh Calvinists. Fully aware of his impending inheritance Duke began to take a keen interest in the decisions made by Marmaduke Gwynne, his cousin in Lille, and he began to negotiate the transfer of power.

Despite his young age, Duke was an intelligent and capable man. And he became increasingly proactive in family affairs. He possessed a more charitable nature than his cousin, as demonstrated by a letter to John Gwynne asking him not to be hard on a tenant in arrears:

*'if he is honest do not be hard upon him as I had rather suffer myself than add to the distress of a poor family' 28*

A kinder man, he may have been, but he was also very focused on salvaging as much of his inheritance as possible.

By 1780 Garth was eerily quiet. John Gwynne was under orders from his grandfather to hide the furniture and keep the doors locked at all times for fear that the Sheriff should gain entry and confiscate their belongings. However, Duke of Llyswen warned against such a stance:

*"Whatever directions you have from my uncle...should the sheriff attempt to force the doors on no account endeavour to prevent him as I am fearful he has full power to enter the house"<sup>29</sup>*

Duke favoured brains not brawn and advised that John try to bribe a lodger they had at Garth, to hide all the furniture in his room, thus keeping it out of the sheriff's hands.

*"Apply to him privately for leave to put the furniture in it (his room) for some time and that he shall be rewarded for his indulgence"<sup>30</sup>*

Soon after Howell Gwynne issued his desperate orders, he died. The exact circumstances of his death are not known. All we know for sure is that he was buried at St Margaret's Church in the shadow of Westminster Abbey on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1780.

With the death of his father the exiled Marmaduke Gwynne of Garth also inherited Llanelwedd, and with it, its debt. The following year the level of threat faced by the Gwynne

family was further illustrated when news reached Breconshire of a planned visit of Mr Gwynne from Lille. On the 23rd of September Duke of Llyswen wrote to John Gwynne from Brecon with the following, rather urgent, warning:

*'I desire you will from me, let your father know, that it is unsafe for him to come, into Breconshire – Be secret. Lose no time, in giving Him, this information.*

*Yours V E*

*Mduke Gwynne*<sup>31</sup>

Marmaduke was often in poor health and it had been said that his removal to Lille, where he stayed with his mother in law, Frances Parry, was designed to aid his recovery. But his suffering was not to be shrugged off so easily. On one occasion Hereford newspapers even falsely reported his death. In October 1782 the doctor reported to John Gwynne that his father had been suffering from Dropsy (Edema). His whole body was greatly swollen, although 'The wind continues to pass in great abundance'. The doctor went on to report that,

*'According to your desire who know his constitution and his failings – I have utterly prohibited the use of spirituous liquers'*<sup>32</sup>

The doctor also warned that if Gwynne were to suffer the dropsy again, it would almost certainly be fatal.<sup>33</sup>

By this time John Gwynne resided at Llanelwedd. The financial wrangling continued unabated and John Gwynne was pulled one way by his father, and another by Herbert Lloyd of Carmarthen. His grandmother Lady Rudd also kept a watchful eye on him. Whenever she visited Wales from her London home her assistant John Cowper would instruct John Gwynne to make all the necessary arrangement in return for a little "Pocket money"<sup>34</sup>. She also frequently requested that he source fowl, butter and game and send it down to London.

Interestingly, it seems that Cowper always wrote on behalf of Lady Rudd so that she never corresponded directly with the illegitimate child. In his letters Cowper makes reference to angry messages from Marmaduke in Flanders, demanding that his Terriers and his 'Phaeton' (a sports carriage) be sent over to France post haste<sup>35</sup>. We also learn that he refused a settlement which would have limited his yearly income to £500. Despite his serious predicament, Marmaduke was clearly not inclined to rein in his extravagant lifestyle.

It would appear that even in France Marmaduke Gwynne was not guaranteed safety from his creditors. His own uncle, James Waller, was furious that he had not paid his debt to him and sent word via a merchant that Gwynne was to be arrested. Cowper reports on the occasion as follows:

*"I had a disagreeable letter from France...It seems he (Marmaduke Gwynne) is under arrest for £200, Mr Waller has assigned over a note of hand to a merchant in Lille and he has arrested him. We had a piteous letter from Mrs Gwynne on the occasion"*<sup>36</sup>

The arrest clearly ruffled feathers but Gwynne soon got free. Whether or not he settled his debt with Waller is unclear. Gwynne was now spiralling back into drunkenness – Cowper says he was "much indisposed since the death of his uncle" in March 1782 – and with his final illness approaching it was down to Duke Gwynne of Llyswen to push for a settlement on the estate. His initial attempts failed. He had even travelled to France to negotiate with the ailing squire only to be turned away empty handed. But early in 1783 an agreement was finally reached. Most of the Pembrokeshire estate had already been sold, Noyadd would return to the Parry family and parts of the Garth estate would remain in chancery but the rest of the estate was to be released to Young Duke Gwynne of Llyswen. Such was the pressure of the courts that Duke was even required to buy back any family furniture that remained at

Garth and Llanelwedd in order to save it from the auction house<sup>37</sup>. However, in March 1783, whilst the settlement was being finalized, the chancery receiver Herbert Lloyd advertised the sale of much of the timber on the Garth and Llanelwedd estates, a plot that a horrified Duke of Llyswen only discovered when he happened upon an advertisement in a Hereford Newspaper. John Gwynne was also aware of the plot and initially bore the brunt of Duke's anger. Duke Gwynne suspected that his uncle Marmaduke Gwynne was behind the scheme but he held the solicitor Herbert Lloyd equally accountable. Within a fortnight of the advertisement Duke had the following warning for his cousin John:

*'Should Mr Lloyd's conduct prove unaccountable to my expectations, no favour can be expected to be shown should opportunity offer a revenge'*<sup>38</sup>

The settlement on the estate was finally pushed through and Duke was soon able to send news to John Gwynne at Llanelwedd.

*'Things are finally concluded...I sincerely hope of all parties, matters are at length so far settled between us...the timber is now my property, and at my sole disposal therefore I hope you will not permit one stick being moved off the several premises'*<sup>39</sup>

Despite the decidedly cool tone of their correspondence, John was permitted to continue at Llanelwedd until after his father's death. As long as life was preserved over in Lille, Duke of Llyswen would remain the periphery.

For months the Gwynnes expected bad news from France and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1784 news finally reached John Gwynne that his father's Dropsy had returned and that he had passed away. John Cowper wrote to him from London with the news.

*'Dear Sir*

*Last post brought the bad news your father dyed the 29<sup>th</sup> instant: he is coming to London to be buryed by his father, Mrs Parry says you are to bring a suit of mourning and she will pay for it...I shall not write to let any body else know, for fear [they] may take the advantage and stop the corpse, this may be kept secret till he is interred.<sup>40</sup>*

And so, in order to avoid the debt collectors who would surely have had the body detained and kept from burial until all his debts were paid, the body was brought in secret through from Lille to St Margaret's Church in Westminster. John Gwynne never did make it to London and received sombre updates from John Cowper:

*"Pierre comes as far as Dunkirk, I shall bury him in private"<sup>41</sup>*

*"I have just received a letter with an account of the corpse being arrive in the river near the Tower of London, tomorrow he will be got on shore and burryed as soon as possible"<sup>42</sup>*

*'Last night I burry'd your father and laid him along side of his father'<sup>43</sup>*

Marmaduke Gwynne was buried on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 1784 alongside his father Howell. It was reported that his mother Dame Mary Rudd, who lived until the age of 96, outliving nearly all her contemporaries, was utterly inconsolable on the occasion.

## **Legacy**

With his father dead there was now no place for the illegitimate John Gwynne within the extended family. No provisions had been made to provide him with an income and he was to

leave Llanelwedd to make way for Duke of Llyswen and his family. Within weeks of his father's death he wrote via Cowper to Lady Rudd to discuss his future, perhaps with hopes of her financial aid. He had clearly indicated that he would like to train as attorney. He no doubt had a good grasp of this business already, since he had been liaising with Herbert Lloyd of Carmarthen for years. But the reply from Cowper and Lady Rudd was less than encouraging.

*'I do not think you capable of an attorney, and I think it a bad business, it smells of dishonesty'*<sup>44</sup>

It would seem that any compassion for John Gwynne had evaporated with his father's death. Such a response to his ambitions can only have been a blow, yet we find that rather than give it up, John immediately pressed ahead with his plans. He moved to Carmarthen and was made a partner of Herbert Lloyd in August 1784. By 1789 he had qualified as an Attorney at Law and after the death of Howell Lloyd in 1815 the firm became known as Gwynne & Howell solicitors. John Gwynne remained one of the most prominent Carmarthen attorneys until his death in 1827.

Finally, Duke of Llyswen moved to Llanelwedd with his family. But his inheritance came hand in hand with the huge debts his cousin had amassed. A list of his creditors included more than 80 names and his personal debt now stood at £31,000.<sup>45</sup> In February 1785 Howell Lloyd met with Duke at Llanelwedd and it was agreed that the entire Garth estate must be sold. However in 1786, before anything could be finalised, Duke also passed away aged 37, leaving his only son Marmaduke Howell Thomas Gwynne to take on responsibility for the family debt, and the sale of the Garth estate.

In 1823 Sarah Wesley (nee Gwynne) died at the age of 96. During her youth Garth House was the scene of unbridled opulence and unlikely alliances – the core of a great estate

built on solid foundations. By the time she celebrated her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday all her brothers and nephews were dead. Much of the Garth estate was in chancery and her childhood home was let to an English farmer. Just 4 months before her death, in April 1823, she would surely have received the news that her ancestral home had gone under the hammer at the Castle Inn, Brecon. The enviable estate, which her father Marmaduke Gwynne had inherited from his grandfather just over a century earlier, had been sold to pay the family's enormous debts.

The sale of the estate finally settled the family's debts and the descendants of Duke Gwynne of Llyswen were able to continue comfortably at Llanelwedd, having succeeded in keeping that one grand house and around a thousand acres of land. Several descendants pursued careers in law and the family remained at Llanelwedd House until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following a fire in 1955 the house was rebuilt and is now the home of the highly successful Royal Welsh Agricultural Show.

Jason Evans, The National Library of Wales

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