

Tregwynt and its Estate

By Ann Sayer

Introduction

Tregwynt mansion lies in the parish of Granston and is one of the oldest and most historic houses in the Pencaer area. It stands on a windswept knoll close to the sea overlooking the beaches of Abermawr and Aberbach.

The name's first recorded appearance is in the Black Book of St Davids compiled in 1326 where it is described as a farm in the manor of Villa Grandi. It is not until 1481 that it is recorded as the centre of a large estate and in the possession of the family which was to own it for the next 500 years, namely the Harries.

The Harries were a Welsh gentry family who prospered from adopting the English system of primogeniture and increased their standing further by advantageous marriage alliances.

Over the centuries, the fortunes of Tregwynt and its family were affected by national events and proof of one such came to light one day in September 1996 when a large hoard of gold and silver coins was unearthed in the garden of the house. It was buried at the time of the Second Civil War in 1648 which was instigated and fought in Wales and most probably involved a member of the Harries family in the Royalist insurgents' ultimate fate.

Almost exactly 150 years later, national events again arrived (literally) on Tregwynt's doorstep when a ball in the house was interrupted by news of a French invasion just 3 miles away.

The house and estate briefly passed out of Harries ownership in 1830 owing to the profligacy of the squire of the day and was bought by a Bristol brewer by the name of Llewelin. On his death a member of a junior Priskilly branch of the Harries acquired the house and estate at auction in 1877 and the family returned to Tregwynt.

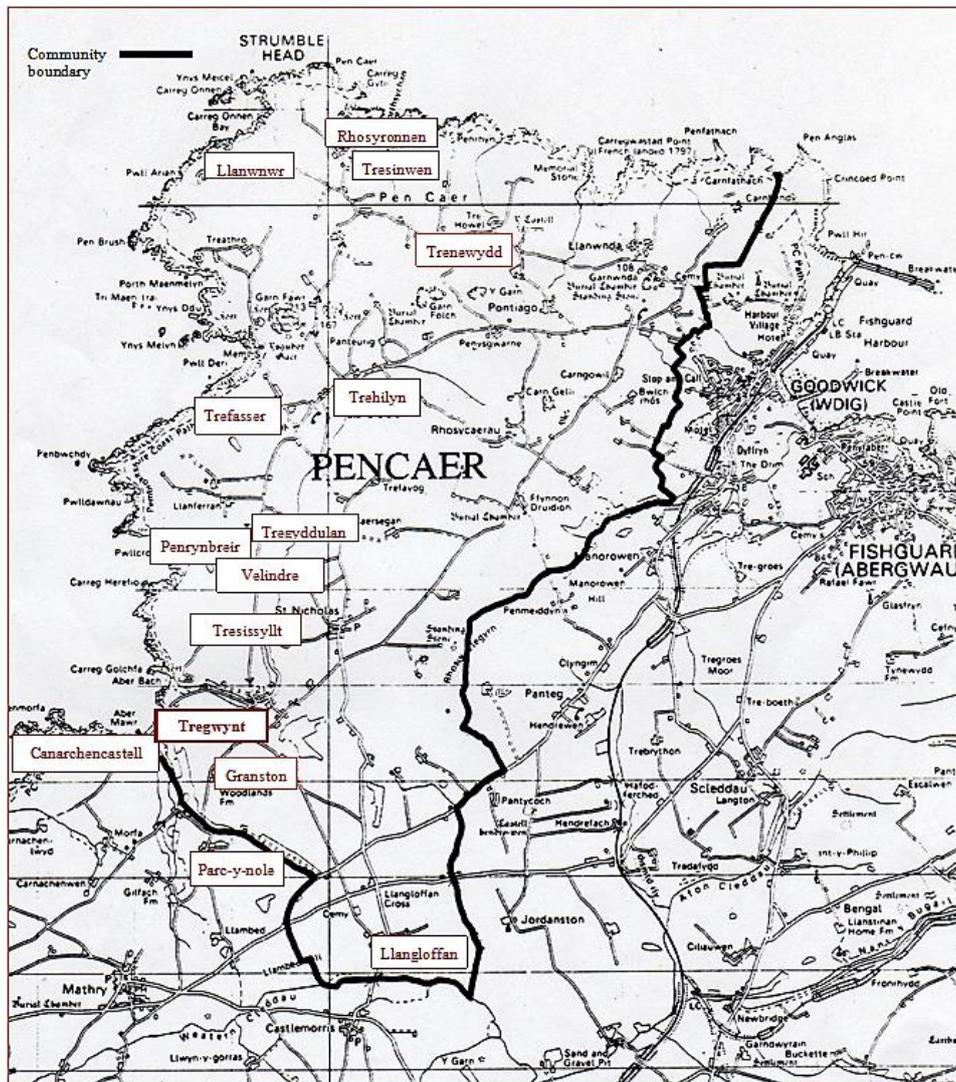
The Tregwynt Story

Although a silver short-cross penny minted between 1205-9 unearthed in the garden of Tregwynt is the earliest evidence of habitation on the site, the close proximity of Neolithic monuments and promontory forts on the two neighbouring beaches is evidence that people were living in the locality for several millennia before this date. Nevertheless, history is derived from written records and it is not until 1326 that the name Tregwynt appears in the annals.

In that year, the Bishop of St Davids commissioned a survey of all his holdings in Pembrokeshire and further afield which recorded his the names of his tenants and the income or services derived from them. It is known as The Black Book of St Davids and it is a priceless record of 14th century life on the Pencaer. Luckily for us, Tregwynt as well as Tressyllt, and Rhosyronwen, were part of the Bishop's estate. From this survey we learn that Tregwynt was a farm of approximately 130 acres in the joint possession of Ieuan Vachaun and David Brown and their co-tenants for which they paid an annual rent of 8s. 5d. This implies that Tregwynt was, like many farms on the Pencaer, still held under the Welsh native land tenure system where a family held the land jointly in a kinship system known as gwely. But, following the English settlement of the county, times were changing, and partible inheritance was at this period gradually giving way to primogeniture.

The Pencaer Peninsula

Map showing Tregwynt and the farms which comprised its estate in the 15th century



Le Hook was also part of the estate but is now a lost place name. See B G Charles's work, The Place Names of Pembrokeshire (Vol I, p. 209).

The next time Tregwynt appears in the records, a radically different picture emerges. A series of deeds held in the National Archives in Kew and dated between 1461 and 1481 show that Tregwynt had become the centre of a large estate owned by Philip ap Howell ap Ieuan Dew, the progenitor of the Harries family. His estate was comprised mainly of farms on the Pencaer nearly all of which bore the same names as they do today.

How Tregwynt came to be transformed from a 130 acre farm in 1326 to the seat of large landholder in 1481 is a mystery, but the intervening 150 years was a time of great turbulence. The Black Death made its first appearance in 1348 which wiped out nearly half of the British population. The great rebellion of Owen Glydwr in 1401 affected Wales badly and in addition to these catastrophes, the county was drawn into the dynastic Wars of the Roses which raged intermittently through the 15th century. The resulting drop in population arising from these events created land acquisition opportunities for those lucky enough to survive and perhaps it was by this route that the owners of Tregwynt acquired their estate.

Over the next century the descendants of Philip ap Howell ap Ieuan Dew inherited the estate from father to son, making little mark upon events until we come to Llewellyn Harries who was born around 1580. He was an ambitious, vigorous and somewhat flamboyant character who aspired to raise the standing of the Harries among the county's gentry. Accordingly, he set about finding a wife from one of the influential families south of the county and his choice fell on Elinor Philipps from a junior branch of the Philipps of Picton family; a union which allied him to a powerful clan. The couple had at least nine children and Llewellyn became sufficiently wealthy to lend money to others. His 'Great Mill' which his tenants were required to use would have been a good source of income in addition to his rents. It is still standing today on the lane leading to Aberbach and Abermawr and has been converted to domestic accommodation.

Llewellyn's Will and Inventory are a rich source of information about the possessions and lifestyle of the family, which, considering the extent of the estate, was surprisingly frugal although it did possess that hallmark of a gentleman's farmyard, namely 6 turkeys. From these documents we also learn that Llewellyn's eldest son, Thomas, predeceased him and that he was guardian of his young grandson George, the heir.

The Tregwynt Hoard

But, was Thomas the only son to predecease Llewellyn? On the 17th September 1996, the first few coins of the largest Civil War hoard ever found in Wales was uncovered during garden levelling works in the garden at Tregwynt. They had been buried in a crockery pot between late 1647 and early 1650 and contained over 500 silver and

gold coins covering the six reigns from Henry VIII to Charles I, plus a heavy gold posy ring bearing the poignant inscription 'Rather death than falce of faith'. The Hoard was declared Treasure Trove and is now in the National Museum of Wales.



Picture: National Museum of Wales

There has been much speculation about who buried the coins but the most likely scenario would seem to be that a member of the family was involved in the Second Civil War which started and was mainly fought in South Wales in 1648 culminating in the Battle of St Fagans near Cardiff fought on 8th May 1648 in which the Royalists were defeated. The prisoner list from that engagement mentions two officers named Harris or Harries - Colonel Arthur Harris and the Quartermaster General but without the magic addition of the words 'of Tregwynt' neither can be positively identified. Several of the officers captured were executed straight away.

Many hoards were buried to escape confiscation or fines at this period, but the presence of the ring which would have been exempt makes this explanation unlikely. It is certain that whoever buried the treasure did not return to retrieve it and nobody in the family knew where it had been hidden.

The Rise and Fall

The family continued to intermarry with leading gentry families and by the 18th century the Harries had sufficiently enhanced their status for George Harries to be appointed High Sheriff of Pembrokeshire in 1738. However, Tregwynt's centuries-long run of good luck was about to run out when the estate fell into the hands of two

brothers, predictably named George and Thomas. Their father, George (b. 1743) had married his second wife around 1785, she was an extremely wealthy young woman named Eliza Gates from Essex - the first non-Welsh bride in the family.

The money Eliza brought into the family paid for the house to be remodelled and a new wing added which contained a ballroom with a sprung floor on the first floor and a large kitchen with servants' offices beneath and Eliza set about becoming a leading hostess among the local gentry. Unfortunately for the Tregwynt estate, her husband died in 1789 when the two boys were only seven and four leaving the pleasure loving and extravagant Eliza in charge with little experience in either business matters or domestic economy.

The French Invasion

Eliza didn't remarry but continued to live a busy social life. She was hosting one of her numerous supper balls on 22 February 1797 when a French invasion landed 3 miles away just below Trehowel farm. Panic ensued. The commander of the local militia (who was one of the guests) rushed off to Fishguard Fort to organise his men and Eliza fled with her two sons at top speed to Narberth, leaving an elderly relative with one musket to defend the house. Luckily the enemy were quickly rounded up without a battle and marched off to Haverfordwest.

Tregwynt is Sold

When Eliza died in 1806, her two sons took just 24 years to run through the remaining wealth of their forebears and the eldest, George, what forced to put the much-diminished Tregwynt estate up for auction at the Garraways Coffee Tavern in Cornhill, London in 1830. Following this calamity, the elder branch of the Harries lost their connection with the house and dispersed.



*George Harries and his younger brother Thomas – portraits painted circa 1789.
Both images courtesy of Mrs Mary Cressweller.*

The purchaser was a wealthy brewer from Bristol named Richard Llewelin and, fortunately for Tregwynt and the estate, he was a good landlord who took an active part in local affairs becoming a JP and High Sheriff of the County in 1840. On his death the estate passed to his nephew, Richard Llewelin Purcell Lewellin, who was a renowned dog breeder. He developed a famous breed of setters or gun dogs known as the Tregwynt hound which is still popular in America today. Richard Llewelin II intended to settle at Tregwynt but luckily the old house narrowly escaped the threatened Victorian makeover when he changed his mind and put the estate up for auction in the Castle Hotel, Haverfordwest on 22nd December 1877.

The Harries come back

For the new owner, John Henry Harries of Priskilly, it was something of a homecoming. He was descended from Llewelin Harries' second son James. This branch of the family had been careful to marry heiresses and consequently had acquired a good holding of lands and property centred on Priskilly near Letterston and also land adjoining the Tregwynt estate on the Pencaer.



Ellen Eliza Florence Harries as a young woman with one of her babies.

Fitting as this change of ownership seemed, it was in fact the death knell of the Tregwynt estate. John Harries had married Ellen Eliza Florence Murray after protracted negotiations over their marriage settlement. It was an arranged match which the bride accepted with a resigned indifference, remarking in her journal 'I suppose I shall marry him.' In the end she did, and it evidently worked out quite happily as nine children appeared in rapid succession. This large brood was a problem as far as Tregwynt was concerned. In negotiating the marriage settlement referred to above, Ellen's father had insisted that the entail on the estate was broken and that on John Harries' death the children should inherit in equal shares.

On the 15th January 1883, John Henry Harries expired suddenly on the threshold of Granston Church aged 43 leaving Ellen to bring up the nine children and run the estate single-handedly. She rose to the challenge and held things together admirably until it was time to pay her children their inheritance. There was no alternative but to sell up and the Tregwynt estate was auctioned in the Commercial Hotel in Fishguard on 25 July 1912. Tregwynt mansion and the home farm were retained by Ellen, but without the income from the estate to support it, the house began to fall into disrepair. It was finally inherited by Ellen's grandson John Harries Burrington, the last member of the Harries family to live in the house and passed on to the open market when he died in 1986. The home farm was acquired by the National Trust.