

ARTHUR BLAYNEY: GREGYNOG'S BACHELOR SQUIRE



This is the story of Arthur Blayney, Gregynog's bachelor squire. He was the last of the Gregynog Blayneys, who presided over the hall and estate throughout an era which would never be replicated in later ages, neither in the Victorian era of the Sudeleys nor the 20th century era of the Davies Sisters.

Arthur was the great-great grandson of John Blayney, who was responsible for the heraldic carvings in what we now call the Blayney room, completed in 1636.

The Civil War and Commonwealth years of the mid 17th century had been tricky years for many gentry families – you had to be careful whose side you were on, and how much of your old religious allegiances you had to hide. The Blayneys were loyal to the King, but managed to duck accusations of being Papists under the Commonwealth. They avoided being fined for being 'delinquent recusants' – unlike their contemporary, Arthur Weaver of Betws, who was heavily fined. In fact the Blayneys seem to have prospered; a post-Restoration survey of 1662 records John Blayney's estate as being worth £1,000 per annum, making him one of the richest gentlemen in Montgomeryshire at the time.

John and his wife Elizabeth had one daughter, Joyce, who married Arthur, a Blayney cousin from the Irish branch. They had one surviving son, Henry, who married Mary Seddon of Worthen in Shropshire – an indication that the Blayneys were beginning to make more English connections than Welsh ones – and they had SEVEN daughters and one son, another John.

In 1707 this John married Ann Weaver, one of the Weavers of Betws who had recovered their fortunes and were now established at Morville near Bridgnorth. Ann Weaver is described as being 'well-endowed' and of course in the 18th century this meant that any fortune she brought to a marriage was at her husband's disposal. John and Ann had five daughters and three sons. Two of the sons died in infancy. The survivor was Arthur who was to live until 1795 and become the last Blayney at Gregynog. Three of his sisters lived to adulthood and resided with him at Gregynog, but none survived him.

For most of his life Arthur was concerned with the estate at Morville as well as the estate at Gregynog. He got on well with his Weaver relations on his mother's side – he was the executor of Weaver wills, and eventually, indeed, inherited the whole estate as none of his male Weaver cousins survived to adulthood. In her book *The Morville Hours* Katherine Swift, who created the beautiful Dower House Gardens at Morville, writes:

'Arthur Blayney was from the Montgomeryshire side of the family. He never married, but at Gregynog, his house near Newtown, he entertained a large circle of family, friends, tenants and stray

travelers... It seems to have been he who added to top storey of Morville Hall, the better perhaps to accommodate his many visitors. Perhaps it was also he who enlarged the already spacious drawing room to provide a more commodious setting for the many sociable gatherings over which he presided.'

And so we begin to see a picture of a genial, sociable soul who seems to have spent a good deal of time travelling between Gregynog and Morville. It also sounds as though he spent more on refurbishing Morville than he did on Gregynog, whose interiors, as surviving records indicate, were very plain, with no carpets and few pictures (one wonders why his sisters did not insist on more comforts). The hospitality, though, was clearly as good as at Morville. *His table*, wrote his old friend Philip Yorke of Erddig in 1799, *was every day plentifully covered with the best things the country and season afforded, for unless it was to do honour to particular guests, he never indulged in far sought delicacies (preferring the ducks and chickens of his poor neighbours, which he bought in all numbers, whether he wanted them or not... but he was very choice in his liquors, which were the best, that care of money could procure.* To modern understanding the quantities seem pretty liberal too: Arthur's household accounts show annual purchases of a pipe of port, and a hogshead of sherry – a 'pipe' being a barrel of one hundred and five gallons, and a 'hogshead' half a pipe.

Arthur Blayney seems from all accounts to have been the very epitome of the genial eighteenth century country squire, except that despite his ancient Welsh lineage he seems to have been without any social pretensions. *His place*, writes Yorke, *not happy in situation, was neither elegant, nor ornamented, but comfortable in the most extended sense of the word; inasmuch that it would be difficult to find another house, where the visitor was more perfectly at his ease, from the titled tourist to the poor benighted way-worn exciseman, who knew not where else to turn in either for refreshment or lodging; for Mr Blayney's hospitality reached every traveler known or unknown...*

He was never married, but was remarkably pleased with, and pleasing to the ladies, who visited him, and they were not a few...

Neither did he have any pretensions to fashion. *His dress was plain and studiously neat and becoming, and he made a London suit every year, and his constant direction to his tailor (whom he had not seen for forty years) was that he made the present coat as the last: His shoe buckles were very small, and he had a dressed pair; they were of the old form and fashion, and he wore his breeches' garters very high.*

A VISIT FROM THOMAS PENNANT

Arthur Blayney clearly enjoyed having visitors. In the early 1770s he entertained Thomas Pennant, who described his stay at Gregynog in his classic *Tours in Wales* (1773). Pennant had travelled south through Llanfyllin, Meifod and Castle Caereinion ...

The country for seven miles more continued hilly, and full of unpleasant commons. Reach Cregynnog, the seat of Arthur Blayney Esq ; whose hospitality I experienced for two or three days. Under his conduct I saw everything in the neighborhood which merited attention. The very worth owner is descended from Brochwel Yscythrog. The elder branch of the family has been ennobled in Ireland since the year 1620, by the title of Lord Blayney of Monaghan; an honor well earned by the services of Sir Edward Blayney knight, in Ireland, in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and her successor.

One evening I was conducted to Castell Dolforwyn, a castle on a high ridge of a hill, very steep ...

Arthur proved to be an enthusiastic tour guide. From Dolforwyn that day they rode via Aberbechan to Newtown, ‘a neat small town with a good market, on the banks of the Severn’. He no doubt enjoyed sharing with Pennant the story of the eccentric Sir John Pryse of Newtown Hall, ‘a gentleman of worth, but of strange habits. He married three wives; and kept the two first who died, in his room, one on each side of his bed; the third declined the honor of his hand till her defunct rivals were committed to their proper place.’

During the ensuing few days Arthur rode with Pennant to Caersws, Carno, Llandinam and Llanidles, but jibbed at an attempt on Plinlimmon ‘an uninteresting object: the base most extensive, the top boggy, and the view from it over a dreary and almost uninhabited country.’

“After a most pleasing ride, return to Cregynnog with my good host, the best shower of a country I ever had the good fortune of meeting.”

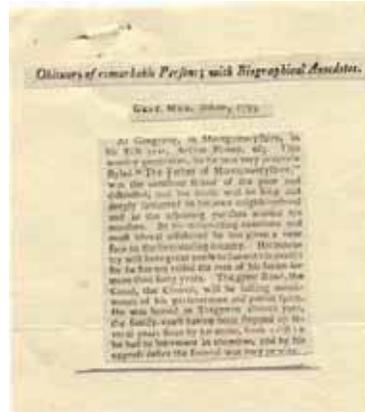
ARTHUR BLAYNEY AND THE LANDSCAPE MOVEMENT



One of the themes of Jane Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* is the period’s craze for landscape or ‘natural’ gardening in the grounds of the nobility and gentry. The name we all remember in connection with this movement is ‘Capability’ Brown who was responsible for gardens such as those at Stourhead in Wiltshire, or, closer to home, Berrington Hall just south of Ludlow.

Arthur Blayney was not immune to this movement; in 1774 he had a plan drawn up for a new garden at Gregynog by the landscape designer William Emes (d. 1803) who worked in the manner of Capability Brown, and whose hallmark was a serpentine series of lakes. Emes worked in a number of places in the late 1760s and 1770s, which Arthur may have visited, including Powis Castle, Chirk Castle and of course his friend Philip Yorke’s house, Erddig. The Gregynog design, with its vast informal plantings and its series of pools and lakes, was typical of Emes. It is not known how many of the projected lakes were formed, but a number were later drained, and only one or two now survive. (This information is from *The Park and the Gardens* by B.S.O. Fox, in **Gregynog**, edited by Glyn Tegai Hughes, University of Wales Press 1977)

THE DEATH OF ARTHUR



In 1795 Arthur Blayney died, at Gregynog, in his eightieth year. A small press cutting found clipped to an old letter found at Gregynog two hundred years later turned out to be his obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for October of that year.

At Gregynog, in Montgomeryshire, in his 81st year, (died) Arthur Blayney, esq. This worthy gentleman, for he was very properly styled "The Father of Montgomeryshire," was the common friend of the poor and distressed, and his death will be long and deeply lamented in his own neighbourhood and in the adjoining parishes around his mansion. By his unremitting exertions and most liberal assistance he has given a new face to the surrounding country. His tenantry will have great cause to lament his death: for he has not raised the rent of his farms for more than forty years. The great Road, the Canal, the Church will be lasting monuments of his perseverance and public spirit. He was buried in Tregynon church yard, the family vault having been stopped up several years since by his order, from a dislike he had to interment in churches, and by his express desire the Funeral was very private.

Arthur Blayney was the last Blayney at Gregynog. When he died in 1795 the estate passed to the family of his cousin, Susannah Weaver, who had married Viscount Tracy of Toddington. Their descendants, the Hanbury-Tracys, later the Lords Sudeley, owned Gregynog for most of the 19thC.