

BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND PETER PEARS AT GREGYNOG

MARY OLDHAM, GREGYNOG'S LIBRARIAN REMEMBERS A GREAT OCCASION FORTY YEARS AGO

When Gwendoline and Margaret Davies bought Gregynog in 1920 with a view to making it the cultural centre of Wales in the aftermath of the Great War one of the first things they did was to convert Lord Joicey's billiard room into a Music Room, complete with an organ built by Rothwell & Co to the specification of their great friend Walford Davies. Over the next twenty years Gregynog became famous for its concerts, its house choir ("Gardener wanted: Tenor preferred") and its annual music festivals, attended by the likes of Gustav Holst and Sir Adrian Boult, and distinguished singers of the period such as Keith Faulkner and Elsie Suddaby.

When in 1960 Margaret Davies, the surviving sister, bequeathed Gregynog to the University of Wales as a residential educational and conference centre and 'a centre for the cultivation and enjoyment of the fine arts', it was clear from the beginning that music would continue to be at the heart of Gregynog life.

An early highlight was the recital given by the composer Benjamin Britten and the tenor Peter Pears on Friday 26th May at the Gregynog Festival of 1972, accompanied by their friend the great Welsh harpist Osian Ellis. Ellis was in residence at Gregynog at the time, as the Gregynog Arts Fellow for that year, and had invited his friends to visit to enjoy the beautiful surroundings and the house's unique musical tradition.

The concert was the event of the year in Montgomeryshire, with many distinguished names from the world of Welsh broadcasting and the arts in the audience. Long before I became Gregynog's Librarian, while still a young woman working in the County Library service, I was fortunate enough to attend the recital and have been telling the world about it ever since.

Accompanied by Benjamin Britten at the piano, Peter Pears performed songs by Schubert, Wolf, Arne and Quilter, and Britten's setting of W. Soutar's *Who are these Children?* Osian Ellis performed Britten's Suite for Harp in C major Opus 83. It was an unforgettable experience to hear these great musicians perform – I particularly remember Britten's sensitive piano accompaniment to Peter Pears's singing in a space whose acoustic perfectly suited his pure high voice.

The Festival programme that weekend also included performances by Cardiff Polyphonic Choir, conducted by Roy Bohana, and on the Saturday evening Osian Ellis introduced a concert of music by young artists.

Alun Chalfont reviewed the occasion in *The Guardian* on 31st May 1972. "To begin the weekend," he wrote, "there was a recital of songs by Peter Pears with Benjamin Britten at the piano, and Osian Ellis played Britten's Suite for Harp in G Major. Later, in the Refectory, there was salmon and white burgundy and a great deal of music. Next to making music, the Welsh love listening to it or talking about it..."

And remembering it, of course – there are copies of the 1972 Festival programme and Alan Chalfont's review in the Gregynog archives, and I am reminded of that wonderful evening every time I come across them.

525 words

Mary Oldham

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