

GREGYNOG AND THE BLAYNEYS

Gregynog's association with the Blayney family began in the 15th century and ended in 1795 with the death of the bachelor squire, Arthur Blayney, whose old friend Philip Yorke of Erddig reported that '*he valued himself on his pedigree no otherwise, than by taking care that his conduct should not disgrace it,*' and was '*by no means partial to Lords or Placemen.*'

This grand old man was the last of what might be described as the senior branch of the Blayneys whose principal seat was Gregynog. However over the centuries the family engendered many side-shoots, leading to the creation of a vast clan of Blayneys which continues to grow to this day, not only in Wales but all over the United Kingdom; also in Ireland, the USA., Australia and New Zealand and many other countries.

The origins of the Blayney family go back into the mists of time and mythology but the originator of the family as we know it today was probably Evan Blayney, who came not from Gregynog but from nearby Llwyn Melyn, Tregynon – a farm which still exists, in the *blaenau*, the headwaters of two streams which flow through the parish. Evan Blayney's name is recorded in a list of burgesses of Welshpool in 1406, but to his Welsh kin he was known as *Ieuan ap Gruffydd ap Llywelyn Fychan ap Einion ap Llywelyn ap Meilir Gryg*. It has been suggested that he anglicised what may have been his Welsh nickname, *Blaenau*, to *Blayney* to avoid sounding too Welsh in this era of the Owain Glyndŵr rebellion.

Evan Blayney had three sons, Howel, Owen and Griffith. It was the youngest, Griffith Blayney, who became established at Gregynog and created the dynasty most closely associated with the house. Griffith's two elder brothers engendered dynasties of their own at nearby Manafon, Ystumgwern (Stingwern) and Aberbechan, but over the next few generations these families lost the Blayney surname. Indeed Griffith Blayney's son Evan also adopted a new surname, Lloyd, possibly from the family of his mother, Janet, daughter of the fine house of Maesmawr, near Caersws. Evan married Catherine, daughter of a landowning family from nearby Newtown.

The upward social mobility of the Gregynog family at the beginning of the sixteenth century is demonstrated by Evan and Catherine's son Thomas ap Evan's two marriages into the influential Herbert family. Thomas, like his cousins at Aberbechan, was therefore well placed to take advantage of the many opportunities for social and financial enrichment created by the Acts of Union between England and Wales in 1536 and 1542. These Acts saw the creation of the county of Montgomeryshire and the imposition of English civil administration on the former marcher lordship of Cedewain. The Crown needed members of Parliament, sheriffs, juries, county coroners and many other offices which local gentry such as Thomas were only too pleased to undertake. Furthermore, the Dissolution of the Monasteries enabled families like the Lloyd Blayneys, who had been leasing monastic lands from the Abbey of Strata Florida for years, to acquire this land outright. If Thomas ap Evan's will of 1561 is to be believed, he owned thousands of acres of land in Tregynon and in local parishes from Llandinam to Llanllugan to Berriew.

Thomas ap Evan had at least four sons and three daughters; the eldest, David, inherited Gregynog and it was he who re-adopted the surname of Blayney. A younger brother, Edward, inherited Maesmawr. Other family members made homes in the locality, married and began to create dynasties of their own. Gregynog, however, remained the principal seat, and David Lloyd Blayney became securely established in Montgomeryshire society when he was appointed Sheriff in 1577. It seems he celebrated the family's increasing distinction by rebuilding what Lewys Dwnn, a contemporary poet described as a 'fair new hall' with glass in the windows – a sure indicator of wealth in the late 16th century. Another 16th century poet, Owain Gwynedd, eulogised the warmth and hospitality of Gregynog and the generosity of David Lloyd Blayney's wife, the 'fair Elizabeth'.

In fact, David Lloyd Blayney had three wives: Elizabeth died and was succeeded by Eva, who in turn was succeeded by Mary. Quite a number of sons are recorded. Two are of particular interest, but we must not forget the others, who were to perpetuate the Blayney name, in an increasingly family network, into the next few centuries.

David Lloyd Blayney's eldest son Lewis inherited Gregynog, married a daughter of Sir John Price of Newtown Hall, and had a son, John. But Lewis died in 1601 when John was only ten years old. As an adult John trained as a lawyer in London, but spent most of his long life at Gregynog, thus ensuring that the Blayney's connection with the house endured for another two centuries.

However John's uncle Edward, one of David Lloyd Blayney's younger sons, had a much more exciting career. After years spent fighting for Queen Elizabeth in the Low Countries – as John's father Lewis had done also – Edward went off to Ireland in 1599 with the Earl of Essex to consolidate the English conquest of that country. Unlike Essex, who made a catastrophic mess of his campaign and returned to London in disgrace, Edward Blayney became highly successful in the conquest and colonisation of what is today the county of Monaghan. In the twenty-first century it is impossible to write the foregoing sentence without speculating on the atrocities which might have attended that success. No such scruples worried the English court at the time; Edward Blayney was raised to the Irish peerage as Lord Blayney of Monaghan, and built Castle Blayney near Lough Mucknoe. Many of the families he settled in the area were Blayney kinsmen, leading to the creation of yet more cadet branches of the family.

Edward Blayney married Anne Loftus, daughter of the Archbishop of Dublin, and by her had two sons, Henry and Arthur. Henry became the second Lord Blayney, but Arthur's son, also Arthur, returned to Wales. He married his cousin, John Blayney's daughter Joyce, or Joyous as it is often spelt in early records. The couple settled at Gregynog, but were almost immediately thrust into the upheavals of the Civil War which broke out in 1640. Arthur Blayney enlisted for the King and fought on the royalist side at the Battle of Beaumaris in 1648, which earned him a knighthood.

Arthur, now Sir Arthur Blayney, died in 1659, predeceasing his uncle (and, of course, his father-in-law) John by six years. He was succeeded by his son Henry, who stayed on at

Gregynog, happy, it seems, to live as a quiet Montgomeryshire squire, but who became rather encumbered, as it would have been seen at the time, with daughters, provision of dowries for whom soon caused him to have to raise mortgages on the estate. Fortunately, as he no doubt saw it, his only son John married the very wealthy Ann Weaver, of the neighbouring Weaver family of Highgate, Bettws. Properties such as Highgate and Penarth on the outskirts of Newtown, which were later to be absorbed into the Gregynog estate, were Weaver homes. The Weavers had also established a seat at Morville, near Bridgnorth in Shropshire.

John and Ann Blayney had numerous children but only one son, another Arthur, and three daughters survived infancy. Neither Arthur nor his sisters married. They all lived on at Gregynog (with summer excursions to Morville) for most of the eighteenth century, resisting all suitors, and also, according to legend, resisting the suggestion of the Irish Blayneys that they should be made heirs to the now substantial estate.

The story of Arthur Blayney the bachelor squire of Gregynog will be told in fuller detail at another time. Suffice it to say that his death in 1795, years after all his sisters had died, ended what might be called the home line of the Blayneys. But elsewhere in the world the Blayneys continued to flourish.

It would be easy to presume that they forgot all about Gregynog – but it appears they did nothing of the kind. In the early nineteenth century the sister of the last Baron Blayney of Monghan, Elizabeth, married Jospeh Richard Wright. They appear to have made their home in London, and in the 1920s we find Florence Wright and her husband Edward Barnett living at 243 South Norwood Hill on the southern outskirts of London, a house they renamed Gregynog.

These days there are Blayneys everywhere, and they've never forgotten Gregynog either. Every now and again they get together for a great Blayney reunion at Gregynog. Dr Keith Blayney – one of the New Zealand Blayneys – has compiled a detailed website containing links to Blayneys world-wide in addition to an exhaustive history of the dynasty.

Acknowledgements:

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