

## WAR COMES TO GREGYNOG

By the end of the nineteen thirties it was clear to everyone in Britain that there would be no escaping a second world war. The League of Nations seemed powerless to prevent Hitler's armies marching into all the nations of Europe. To the Davies family this was a terrible disappointment, especially to Gwendoline and Margaret's brother David whose life had been given to the cause of international peace.

But Gregynog carried on while it could. In '*The Spiritual Pilgrims*' Professor **Ian Parrott** writes:

“Meetings were still held at Gregynog in 1939. At the 10<sup>th</sup> Social Reconstruction in Wales Conference in January, Mr (later Sir) Ifan ap Owen Edwards was talking on the different types of community and people in Wales – but boys and girls are fundamentally the same everywhere, he said. There were visitors from Canada and South Africa; and there was the appreciation of Margaret Davies's special interest, the Boverton Girls' Camp, by Mrs. Neville Chamberlain, who wrote from 10 Downing Street that it must be a wonderful joy to Miss Margaret Davies to be able to do so much for the girls from the mining districts. But peace-time was running out.”

Gregynog's world of music, conferences and fine printing was slipping into the past as members of staff were called up for military service, and the 'war on the home front' began. The Monets and Cezannes were packed up and sent for safety to the National Library of Wales, and preparations began to hand the hall over to the Red Cross.

On the May 18<sup>th</sup> 1940 Gwen Davies wrote to her great friend and mentor Tom Jones: “We have been terribly busy the last few days. All the pictures have been taken down and out of their frames, lists made and everything parcelled this morning. About half of them – the most important – have been sent by road to the National Library, Aberystwyth, to be stored there with our fine books & MSS & a set of 'Gregynog books'. The remaining pictures are stacked in the Music Room on the floor as it was felt wise not to house all our eggs in one basket.”

So the pictures were packed up, the Gregynog Press closed, and the last concerts were held.



As **John Hywel** records:

“There was to be one memorable ‘Matthew Passion’ on Maundy Thursday, 1939 before the European War broke out, and all activity became subjugated to the war effort. Ironically, the actual final concert by the Gregynog Choir and Sir Walford (Davies) took place away from their beloved music room. This was a choral recital given at the Village Hall, Llandinam in December 1940; in aid of the Lord Mayor’s National Air-Raid Distress Fund. Sir Walford conducted patriotic songs and seasonal carols, closing with the music of his beloved Bach, ‘Jesu, joy of man’s desiring’, and the piece that *was* Walford for so many people, ‘Wachet Auf’.”

At the beginning of the Second War Sir Walford Davies, aged seventy, had moved with the BBC to Bristol and resumed his broadcasts to schools and also to ‘Everyman’. His programmes about music became a memorable feature of radio broadcasting during the early years of the war, indeed he is famous for the work he did to introduce classical music to a popular audience of all ages.

For a while however, he continued to visit Gregynog. Early in 1940 when Thomas Jones and Walford were seen by Gwendoline emerging from the summer house outside the Music Room, it soon got round that C.E.M.A. (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) was ‘born’ there. This organization, later the Arts Council, was financed through the Pilgrim Trust, of which T.J. was from 1930 to 1945 the Secretary “... and was to prove much more than just a wartime effort of sending orchestras and soloists to munitions factories ...”

But on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1941 Sir Walford Davies died. “The memorial service at Gregynog,” says John Hywel, “signified the end of an era in that lovely house.”



Ian Parrott records: “Those who were gathered together at Gregynog for a Memorial Service on April 19<sup>th</sup> included Sir Adrian Boult (who conducted), Thalben-Ball (who played), Sir Percy J. Watkins (Secretary to the Welsh Department, Board of Education) and T.J. Dr Richard Jones of Llandinam read the lessons and prayers while musical items were given by Elsie Suddaby, W. R. Allen, Hubert Davies, Ronald Harding and Charles Clements. The Council of Music, the Aberystwyth and Montgomeryshire Festivals and C.E.M.A. were represented in the congregation and all joined in the prayer: “Especially do we praise thee for the gifts and graces with which Thou didst endow Henry Walford Davies, our beloved friend and teacher, for the simplicity of his character; for the strength of his vision and for the beauty and rich content of his mind. We thank Thee too, for his sincerity and courage; for his contagious enthusiasm and inspiring leadership and for the generous outpouring of his gifts in the service of humanity.”

### **FIRST WARTIME WINTER AT GREGYNOG**

The winter of 1939/40 was very cold. In February 1940 Gwendoline Davies wrote from her stepmother’s home at Broneirion, Llandinam, to her old friend and advisor Thomas Jones:

“Mr Hughes (Gregynog’s estate manager) was over this morning and told us of the awful havoc the ice and rain did at Gregynog a week ago; he says it will take years to clear the woods, the rain froze to the trees as it fell till the branches were so heavy they came crashing down. The beautiful birches in the dell have had their tops broken off and in the wood great branches have been torn from the oak trees. It is all very sad, but I reminded him that these old woods have weathered the storms of hundreds of years and I have no doubt will recover again though maimed – it all seems part and parcel of the terrible times we are living in – even nature joining in the wholesale destruction we are watching of so much of our work and dreams ...”

This must have been a terrific storm as Gwen writes about it again in a subsequent letter. She also writes of birds having died frozen to the trees – picked up from the ground as they dropped – and sheep found on Plynlimmon frozen while still standing.

## **GREGYNOG AND THE RED CROSS**

Gwen and Daisy were already making a major contribution to the war effort, principally by handing over Gregynog to the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance for use as a Convalescent Home. Among those who spent time here were not only members of the armed forces on recovery leave but volunteer fire watchers, ambulance drivers and others from the front line of the bombing in cities such as Coventry and Birmingham, who were given the opportunity of a short respite in the peace of the countryside, after the months of night duties in which they risked their lives.

## **THE RED CROSS AND THE ST JOHN'S AMBULANCE IN WORLD WAR TWO.**

*This information is taken from a website  
CARING ON THE HOME FRONT.ORG.UK*

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance were ready for action. Thousands of our members provided essential care, training and support on the Home Front, from the Blitz to VJ Day.

During the Second World War the volunteers of the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance worked side by side to care for humanity at its darkest hour. The main aim of this Joint War Organisation was to help those who were sick or wounded as a result of the war. They played a major part in providing welfare services for both the public and those in the forces. Volunteers helped the elderly, the infirm and the young, offering what comfort and support they could during and after air raids, and giving emotional and practical support when they were most needed. Joint War Organisation welfare services for wounded soldiers included transport, advice and guides on the journey home. Hospital welfare workers looked after these injured heroes, contacting their relatives and reuniting families. Throughout the Blitz, Joint War members operated ambulances, acted as stretcher-bearers, ran mobile units, and made up first aid parties, rescuing people from buildings demolished by bombs. They also manned first aid posts, for example in the London Underground stations that people were using as air raid shelters.

Their work went further. As war loomed, St John Ambulance and the British Red Cross had begun to train its members, Civil Defence workers and thousands of members of the public in air raid precautions (ARP).

## THE WAR BROUGHT SAD FAMILY LOSSES TO THE SISTERS

Gwendoline and Margaret's stepmother, who had influenced their lives so deeply, died in the Spring of 1942. "After which," Ian Parrott writes, "her companion, Katherine Bebb, moved over to Gregynog to be a companion there. Visitors included Lewis Casson and Sybil Thorndike. Many old friends, including both Evelyn and Bertha Herring, came again to see the ladies."

"The two Spiritual Pilgrims of Gregynog were reaching the end of their journey... to their progress towards the evening of life was added the horror of a protracted war, which was directly to touch their own flesh and blood. Margaret and Miss Blaker spend weeks putting strong covers on 'paper-backs', so that books could be sent to soldiers who were on active service."

In 1939 the sisters' nephew Michael, son of their brother David, had married Eldrydd Dugdale, and joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Their baby son, David, was born in Belfast in 1940. Gwen wrote to T.J.: "Eldrydd and little David come here to stay & Mike gets leave on Sunday & is joining them here. We went to see little David last Tuesday, he is a dear merry little chap." Gwendoline and Margaret were particularly close to Michael, who shared their love of music and the arts.



*Mike Davies and friends in happier times at Gregynog before the war.*

The blow of the death of their brother David in June 1944 was followed by another terrible shock in September of that year when they heard that Michael had been killed in action in Holland. Thomas Jones did his best to console the sisters and keep them busy with visitors such as Lord and Lady Macmillan, the actress Dame Sybil Thorndike and her husband Lewis Casson.

But for Gwendoline, however, Mike, the most creatively artistic member of the family, had gone, and all that was left for her was her work as Commandant of the British Red Cross Hospital at Gregynog. Much of the house was occupied by the Red Cross, the patients including convalescent soldiers and civil defence workers, until the end of the war.

### **DUTCH CHILDREN AT GREGYNOG**

For Margaret consolation was to be sought in giving pleasure to visiting Dutch children: 30 of them came in 1945 and nearly three times as many came the following year. They signed their names and drew pictures in the Visitors' Book. Gregynog, they wrote, was a happy home in which to spend part of their childhood and "it is for our Misses Davies that we sing this song of gratitude."



These children and their families had suffered terribly during the German occupation of their country, and had been brought to Britain for a 'health' holiday with good food, fresh air and freedom from fear. A reunion of those who were here was held at Gregynog in 1992, and since then many more have come back to visit, bringing their new families with them.

In 2003 Fia Gillon, now of Fredericksberg, Virginia, brought her husband Donald Tompkins to see the house she remembers so well, and shared her memories us.

Mrs Tompkins explored the gardens, which she remembered from her visit – especially the tunnel under the bridge, also the golden yew hedges. She said that the children were

allowed to run free in the house and gardens. They loved to run up and down the long corridors on the first and second floors of the house and the Miss Davieses didn't mind a bit. They seemed to tolerate the noise and disruption. "They knew it was the first time in our lives that we had been able to run about and make a noise without fear of the consequences."

The Miss Davieses would occasionally host tea parties in their upstairs sitting room where you could look out of the windows over the gardens. Mrs Tompkins remembered being so excited when it was her turn to receive an invitation from these gentle, shy old ladies.

Mrs Tompkins had terrible memories of the starvation in Holland at the end of the war. There was nothing to eat except turnips, she remembered. Her grandparents died of starvation, like many other old people who gave whatever food came their way to their children and grandchildren.

## **THE POST-WAR YEARS**

The war had taken its toll on both sisters, particularly Gwen whose health had never been robust. By the late 1940s her strength was failing and she was mostly confined to a wheelchair. In 1951 she was admitted to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, where, on the first of July, she died. "Oh spiritual pilgrim, rise," sang the choir at her memorial services in September that year, while that other spiritual pilgrim, her sister Margaret, was left at Gregynog to face the future alone.

The "New Elizabethan Age" heralded by the accession to the throne of the young Queen Elizabeth in 1952 helped to renew the hope and optimism of the war- and austerity-weary British. Margaret, too, tried to bring Gregynog to life again with music and art and scholarship, with the particular help of Professor Ian Parrott, a successor to Walford Davies as Gregynog Professor of Music at Aberystwyth. It was during these years that Margaret decided to give the hall and the 700 acre estate to the University of Wales, to ensure that the traditions she and her sister had created should live on, and that Gregynog should endure as the cultural heart of Wales.