

PLAS MAWR, CONWAY.



Plas Mawr, Conway

(Read by Mr. Harold Hughes, October 5th, 1892)

THIS interesting relic of the Tudor period, called in the Heraldic visitation of Wales, 1588, Plas Newydd (New Mansion) was built by Robert Wynne (born 1520), third son of John Wynne, of Gwydir, on a piece of ground immediately south of the house called "Plas Uchaf."

On Robert Wynne's return from service abroad, under Sir John Hobbie, he married Dorothy, daughter of Sir William Griffith, of Penrhyn, Knight, Chamberlain of North Wales, widow of William Williams, of Cochwillan.¹

After her death in 1586, he married the daughter of James Dymock, of Willington, by whom he had several children. His monument, together with that of his first wife, is in Conway Parish Church.

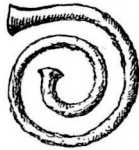
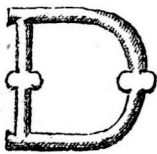
It is necessary, before proceeding to the description of the house, to glance at the ancestry of Robert Wynne, and his first wife, Dorothy, as much of its ornamentation bears reference to their descent and family connections.



ARMS OF ROBERT WYNNE.—I. Robert Wynne was of the Royal British line, tracing his descent, through Owain Gwynedd, from Caractacus. Owain Gwynedd, Prince of Wales, was the son of Gryffydd ap Cynan, the last to bear the title of King of Wales.

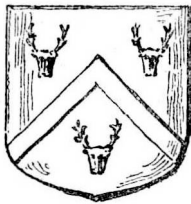
¹ Her grandson by her first marriage was the distinguished Archbishop Williams, Keeper of the Great Seal, and Archbishop of York, who so nobly defended his native town, Conway, during the Parliamentary troubles of 1641.

His arms were "vert, three eagles displayed in fesse or." He was also indirectly descended from Collwyn ap Tangno, who bore "sable a chevron between three fleur-de-lys argent."



2. Dorothy, his wife, through her father Sir William Griffith, claimed as her ancestor Marchudd ap Cynan. He bore "Gules, a Saracen's Head, erased at the neck proper, wreathed about the temples, or." His descendant, Ednyfed Vychan (also the ancestor of Sir

Owain Tudor, who by his marriage with the French Princess Catherine, Henry V.'s widow, was grandfather of King Henry VII.) was directed by Llewelyn the Great (in commemoration of the slaughter of three English officers, whose heads he brought to the Welsh Prince) to bear "Gules, between three Englishmen's Heads couped argent, a chevron ermine."

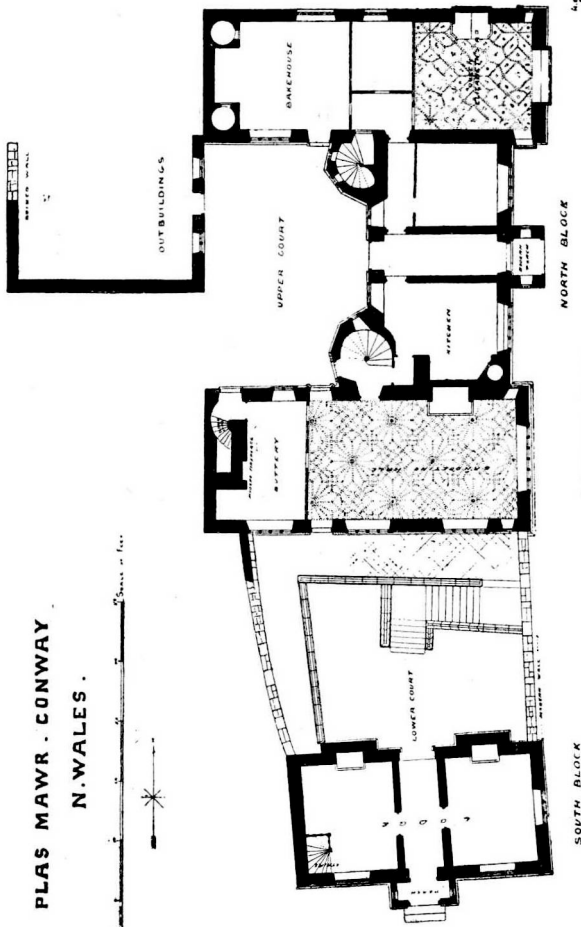


ARMS OF DOROTHY GRIFFITH.—

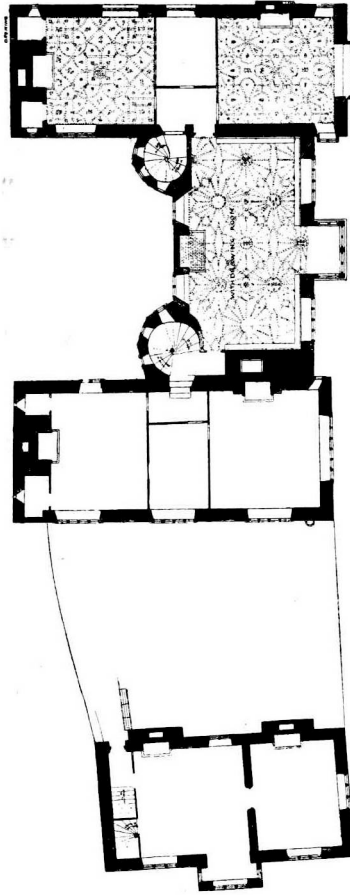
Penrhyn came to the Griffiths by the marriage, in 1353, of Ednyfed's great grandson, Gryffydd of Cochwillan, with Eva, who bore the arms of Iarddur of Penrhyn, "Gules, a chevron between three stags' heads caboshed argent." The above-mentioned heraldic bearings are more than once repeated.

The main approach to Plas Mawr is on the south side, a wide passage leading from the street, through the centre of a small block of buildings, probably the residence of the porter and other retainers, to a courtyard. At the street end of this passage, through what

PLAS MAWR . CONWAY
N. WALES .



PLAS MAWR, CONWAY, N. WALES.



NORTH BLOCK

SOUTH BLOCK

FIRST FLOOR PLAN.



may be called the south block, is an entrance porch, with the Arms of England carved over the outer arch, and over the inner doorway the Greek motto, "Ἀνέχου, Ἀπέχου," with its Latin rendering, "SUSTINE, ABSTINE" ("Bear, Forbear.") It is stated in old accounts, that the monograms, IHS., XPS., with date 1585, were on the south elevation of this block, but all traces of these have disappeared. A wooden staircase, of which the newel alone exists, connected the upper and ground floors. A door in the gable of the attic, with a hole in its pediment for the beam of a hoist, would lead us to imagine that this floor was formerly used as a storeroom.

The main block of buildings is situated on the opposite or north side of the courtyard. The ground rapidly rising from south to north necessitates the principal rooms in the main or north block being at a considerably higher level than those in the south block. A picturesque flight of steps, therefore, in this lower courtyard, leads to a terrace on a level with the floor of the chief rooms, from which a doorway opens directly into the hall, or chief apartment of the house.

The north block forms, on plan, three sides of a hollow square, surrounding a second courtyard, with buildings on the north, east, and south sides. There are also some remains of extensive outbuildings on a portion of the west side.

The hall occupies the southern wing. Opposite the entrance door is another opening into the upper courtyard. Both these doors open directly into the great hall, which, in this respect, differs from most of the halls of this period, in which the doors are generally screened off to prevent draughts. At the west end of the hall is a massive oak screen separating it from the buttery. A stone staircase gives communication between the buttery

and cellars below. A door on the north side of the hall opens on to the principal staircase, on plan circular within, and of an irregular octagon without. Passing this staircase we reach the kitchen, with its large arched fireplace and ancient spit-irons. Further northward is a passage running from a porch in the middle of the east front, through the centre of the house, to the upper courtyard.

An undecorated room on the other side of this passage, probably intended for the use of the retainers, occupies the corresponding position to the kitchen.

The north wing contains three rooms on the ground floor. The eastern one is generally known as "Queen Elizabeth's Room," probably so called from the initials, "E. R.," and the Royal Arms and Emblems worked in plaster over the fireplace.

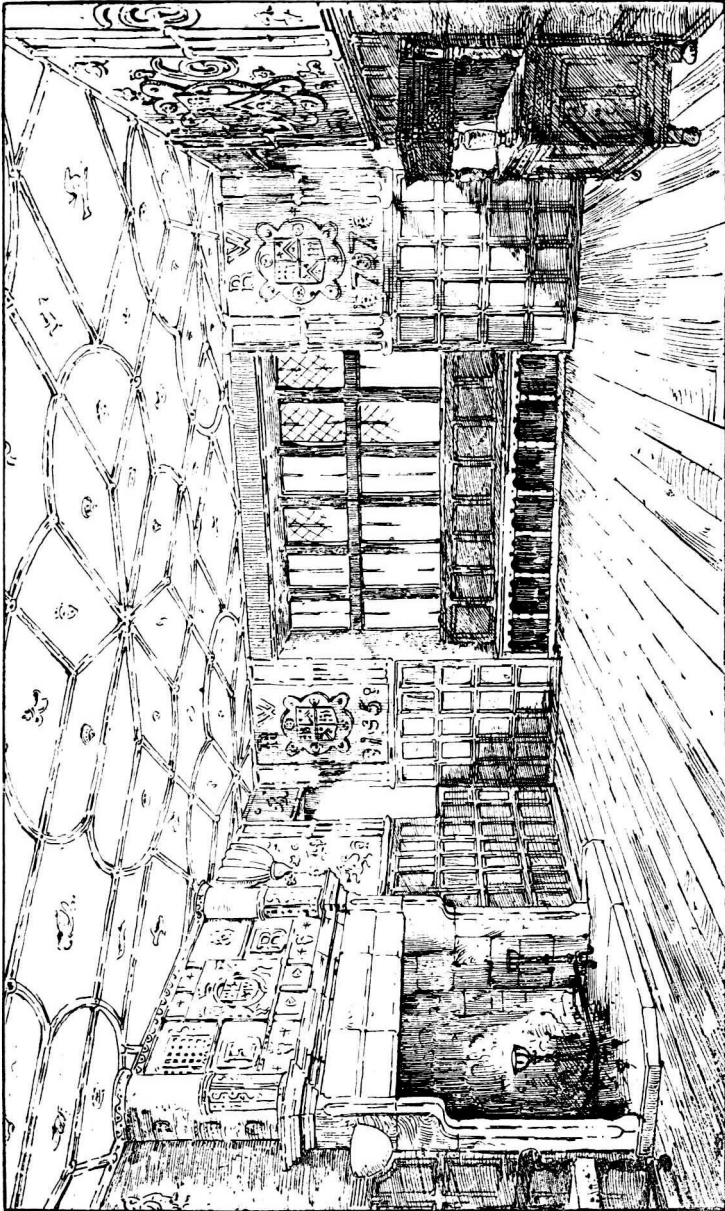
The west room has a huge fireplace with two ovens and would have been the bakehouse. A small room between these, in all probability, would have been the "bolting room" for sifting flour, possessed by most houses of importance of this period.

A second turret-staircase in the north wing corresponds to that opening out of the great hall in the south wing.

The central portion of the first floor on the east of the upper court-yard is occupied by a large withdrawing room extending between the two wings. The north wing contains a suite of three rooms, two richly decorated, with a small one between. The south wing has similar apartments but undecorated.

Above this floor are the attics. The southern turret staircase, which is carried up to a considerable height above the roof, commands an extensive view of the town and surrounding country.

It is uncertain at what date the building of Plas Mawr



QUEEN ELIZABETH'S ROOM.

was commenced. The dates remaining on the walls and ceilings are 1576, 1577, and 1580; but doubtless the actual commencement was some years previous to the earliest of these.

The north wing and outbuildings would appear to be the oldest part of the house still existing; the windows, with the exception of the dormers and those in the east gable, being of an earlier type than those of the rest of the building. These are late Gothic in character, with label-mouldings. Those in the south block are also of a late Gothic type, but are surmounted by renaissance pediments. In the east front of the north wing are projecting windows of the same general design, but with narrower lights and with more advanced classic details. One of these windows has the date 1576 in the tympanum. With the exception of a few windows with massive oak frames and mullions set diagonally without any grooves for glass, the remainder of the windows in the north block are formed with stone mullions, joints and transoms projecting $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the face of the wall. These have peculiar flat relieving arches or lintels over them, ingeniously constructed to throw the weight on the mullions.

The doorways also are of various dates. That in the eastern porch is of late Tudor type with three-centred arch and quatrefoils in the spandrils; those in the south block having renaissance pediments. The present east porch is of very late date, but occupies the position of a former one. The corbels belonging to the early one remain half covered up in the masonry of the present porch, and some of its shafts and capitals were discovered in the basement a few years ago.

The wooden partitions in the north wing, though from their section appearing of an early date, have carving

and mitre joints, showing them to be of a later date than one would expect. Those, on the other hand, in the south wing, though of a late section, retain the old butt-jointing.

An examination shows us that the north wing has been roofed at a time previous to that when the present roof over the central portion of the building was erected. There are indications that the portion of the former roof, which is now covered by the latter, was at a previous period external.

It is probable that the withdrawing room was designed for an open timber roof, the roof in the attic over it being more elaborate in design than the others and evidently intended to be seen. Oak seats still remain attached to the walls in the hall and withdrawing room.

Several of the rooms retain very fine plaster ceilings of geometrical patterns, and both the ceilings and walls have a fine display of plaster ornaments, representing royal arms and badges; the arms borne by Robert Wynne and his wife Dorothy Griffith, the armorial bearings of their ancestors and family connections, and various initials and dates.

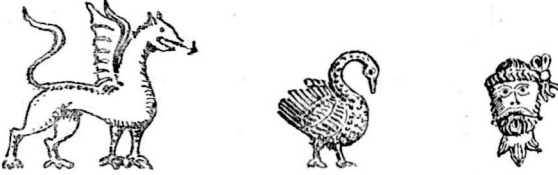


ROYAL ARMS, with their supporters, the Lion of England and the Dragon of Wales, are represented over the fireplace in Queen Elizabeth's Room; also the Lion of England, passant guardant.

ROSE AND PORTCULLIS.—Badges of the House of Tudor.

FLEUR-DE-LYS.—From arms of Collwyn-ap-Tangno.

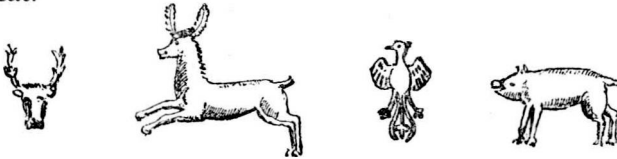
Amongst the other plaster ornaments are to be found:



DRAGON.—The Red Dragon of Cadwaladr, the last King of Britain, the cognizance of Wales; which also occurs as one of the supporters of the arms of Queen Elizabeth.

SWAN.—A royal badge taken by Henry IV. after his marriage with Lady Mary de Bohun, daughter of Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Northampton, who was also indirectly an ancestor of Dorothy Griffith. [This badge was given by Margaret, Henry VI.'s Queen, to her supporters in the Wars of the Roses.]

ENGLISHMAN'S HEAD.—From the arms of Ednyfed Vychan, successor to Iarddur in the office of Grand Forester of Snowdon, and Counsellor of Llewelyn the Great.



STAG'S HEAD.—From the arms of Iarddur of Penrhyn, Grand Forester of Snowdon.

STAG.—The white hart, so well-known as the famed cognizance of Richard II., occurs also in the arms of Madog ap Iarddur, of Penrhyn.

EAGLET.—From the arms of Owain Gwynedd, Prince of Wales.

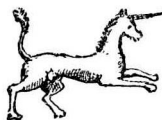
THE BOAR.—In the arms of Catherine of Berain, who had for the third of her four husbands Morys Wynn, of Gwydir, the eldest brother of Robert Wynne.



ARMS OF ROBERT AND DOROTHY WYNNE.—An impaled coat of arms. Wynne and his principal quartering



impaling Griffith and her principal quartering. The chevron between three eaglets is here incorrect, and was evidently employed to obtain effect of chevron pattern running through shield.



GRIFFIN, LION'S FACE, and UNICORN.—The Griffin in Lewys Dwnn's *Heraldic Visitations of Wales*, is given as the crest of the Gryffith family, but a seal of Sir Rys Gryffith, dated 1540, bears "A man's head in profile wreathed about the temples couped."

OWL.—From the arms of John Hookes, of Conway, who married Ellen, aunt of Robert Wynne, who bore "Argent a chevron between three owls azure."

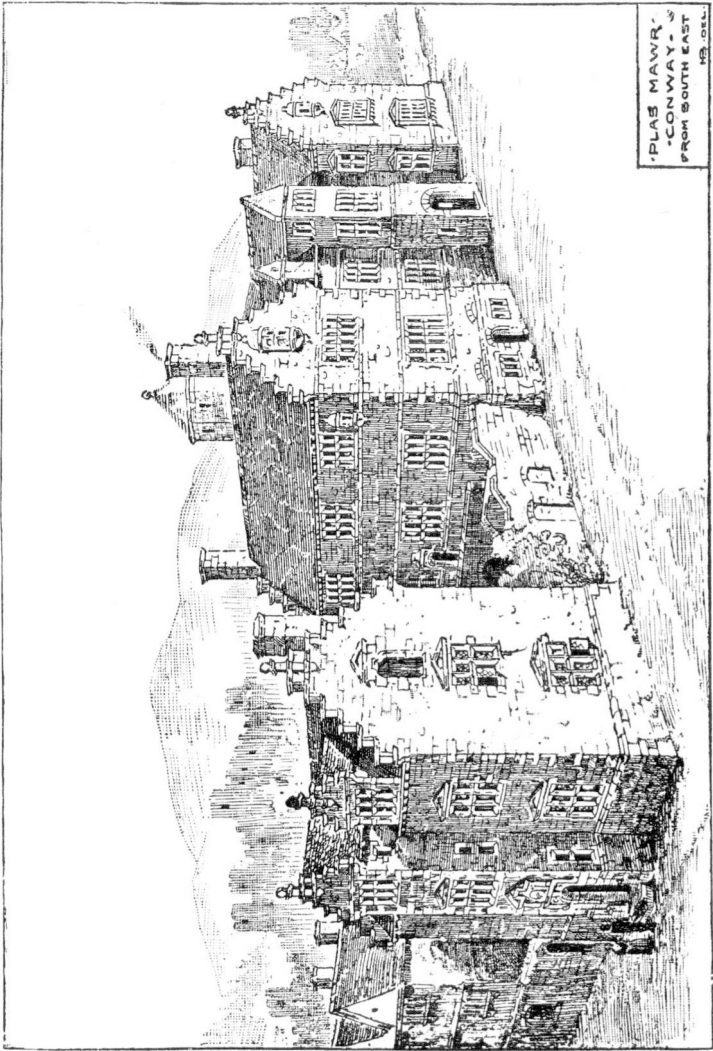


LION RAMPANT.—Arms of Sir Richard Dalton, whose daughter and heiress married William Vychan, of Penrhyn, 1440.

BEAR AND RAGGED STAFF.—The badge of the Earl of Leicester, Baron of Denbigh, Bromfield, and Vale.

STORK, AND THE OAK BRANCH AND BIRD.

The rooms retaining fine plaster ceilings are: the hall and Queen Elizabeth's Room on the ground floor, and



PLAS MAWR
CONWAY, S
FROM SOUTH EAST
185. DEL.

the withdrawing and two chief rooms in the north wing on the first floor. The withdrawing room has the date 1580 on the ceiling. The walls of the same rooms, with the exception of the hall, retain their plaster ornamentation, and, in Queen Elizabeth's Room and the room over the bakehouse, have the date 1577.

Several of the rooms possess very fine fire-places, with flat heads formed of several stones curiously let into each other for support and prevented from spreading by large blocks inserted in the walls at either side. On the plaster work in the hall, over the fire-place, is the date 1580.

Viewing the house from the exterior, the stepped gables form a striking feature. It has been supposed that Robert Wynne introduced these, being struck by the gables formed in the same manner which he had seen in Holland.

In the eastern gables are two picturesque oriels; and overlooking the lower court-yard is a curious little one in which, probably, a lantern light was placed to light the court-yard below.

In all probability the garden of the house, with its bowling green, was on the east side. An old bowl, now in the hall, was discovered in the cellar.

For much information relating to Robert Wynne and his wife Dorothy, their ancestry and connections, and the manner in which he employed the plaster decorations on the walls and ceilings to illustrate his own illustrious descent, and his connection through his wife with the Royal House of Tudor and other notable families, I have to thank my friend and fellow-worker Mr. Arthur Baker, who has placed at my command the result of his researches, as embodied in his valuable monograph on

Plas Mawr. The illustrations in this paper, from his history and description of Plas Mawr, have been most generously furnished by Mr. Arthur Baker.

After being for some time one of the residences of the Mostyns, some of the principal rooms were used as a parochial school, and others let out as tenements to poor families. From this condition Plas Mawr was rescued in 1886 by the Royal Cambrian Academy, under whose reverent and fostering care this unique specimen of Welsh architecture is preserved from further decay, and fitly employed as their head-quarters, where an annual exhibition is given of the works of its members. It is proposed to build a picture gallery on the west side.

