



STRADEY CASTLE

I was brought up at Stradey as a child from the age of approximately two weeks apart from one year lived at Llandeilo and periodic disappearances to far-flung educational establishments. Therefore I was brought up with a sense of Stradey as being the family home. My father had an interest in the history of the place, and as I grew older I began to realise that the story about the families who had created Stradey and had presided over its fortunes and declines for hundreds of years was not uniform or even entirely straightforward.

One of the family friends was the late Major Francis Jones, a former county archivist for Carmarthenshire and Herald of Wales Extraordinary. Stradey to him was as attractive as a buttercup to a bee. He made frequent visits, which were always popular with the family, and he managed to extract and analyse vast amounts of information concerning not just my own family's contributions to the Stradey story but the earlier history of the Estate before my family of Lewis became involved.

Another historian to whom Stradey became of interest was Robert Craig (whom we as a family knew as Robin Craig). The work of Robin Craig and Francis Jones has been of great assistance to students of the history of not just this Estate but to many other families, businesses and estates around the Llanelli area. With particular reference to Stradey, however, Howard M Jones in his book "Llanelli Lives" acknowledges the value of the work of Francis Jones and Robin Craig as material for his interesting article on the Mansel Lewis family.

Now that I have started to carry out heritage tours of the house and the gardens, I have naturally begun to do some more research about the historical perspective of Stradey. What I have discovered in the process is that the name of Mansel coupled with the family name of Lewis has served to obscure the earlier history of the Estate. Most of us who have an interest in history experience it most immediately through our own family

story. The paradox about family history is that you have to start in the present and travel backwards into the past; whereas history as learned in school and college requires that you begin at the beginning (with apologies to Dylan Thomas) and work forwards. Some of us have the inclination and the energy to do both types of history, and learn to go in both directions. Most of us however are either too busy or too idle to hold these 2 elements of the paradox in tension. I am currently attempting to learn how to do this.

What I have discovered is that Stradey was not always a Mansel foundation. Francis Jones writes in his "Historic Carmarthenshire Homes & Their Families" (1987) that between 1551 and 1610 the Stradey area of land was owned by numerous individual farmers. In the early 1600s, he tells us, the collection of farms became part of the estate of the Vaughan family of Derwydd. Thus it remained in the hands of a Welsh family, but on very different terms: owner-occupation gave rise at a stroke to a landlord and tenant relationship. Derwydd would have been probably a 4 hour journey from Stradey at that time. History has not so far yielded an explanation as to why it became attractive to the small farmers to sell and how the Vaughan family suddenly became able to afford the purchase of approximately 500 acres of land (and presumably buildings) more than 15 miles away from their home estate.



It was sometime during the middle of the 17th century that Mary Vaughan, daughter of Sir Henry Vaughan of Derwydd, married John Mansel, son of Sir Francis Mansel of Muddlescwm (should we understand that name to mean middle valley?).

The Mansel family really impressed their stamp upon the Stradey Estate by the construction of the mansion house in what my family has always known as the wilderness, about 400 yards to the south of our own house. Apparently in 1670 it contained 15 hearths, and it remained in the ownership of the Mansel family until Mary Anne Mansel died in 1808 without issue and a widow.

It is interesting to note that the Vaughan connection was recognised by the Mansel family until late into the 18th century. Mary Anne Mansel's father was Sir Edward Vaughan Mansel. It was his extravagance and improvidence that led to his imprisonment in Fleet Prison for debt. My Great Great Grandfather Thomas Lewis, solicitor of Llandeilo, was (according to the family story I learned as a boy) very generous in the way in which he helped out Edward Vaughan Mansel with his financial difficulties. It was, I was told, in recognition and appreciation of that generosity that Mary Anne Mansel gave the Stradey Estate to Thomas Lewis in her will.



Thomas Lewis died in 1829, and spent the rest of his life at Llandeilo. His son David Lewis was born in 1797. It is most interesting to note the family's almost immediate change in its perception of its status in Carmarthenshire society on inheritance of the Stradey Estate because Thomas Lewis sent his son to Eton (the first member of the family to go there) and then to Oxford (Brasenose College). David was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1823. He began construction of the house in 1847.

Stradey was quite big enough when David Lewis and his building team completed the construction of the new Stradey house in 1855. He must have enjoyed the benefit of his new house for approximately 20 years, for he died in 1872. Hardly had he been laid

to rest before his son and heir, my Great Grandfather Charles William Mansel Lewis, embarked on the construction of an extension to the house. In fact what my Great Grandfather wanted was a studio, because he was a very serious artist. He needed a large room with a skylight, and this meant that he had to construct a whole new wing which had a flat roof in order to take the skylight. Artistic or architectural considerations demanded that this should be built in a way which was sympathetic to and compatible with the original house. Therefore the essential demand of this young man (he was only 27 at the time) for an artist's studio grew like Topsy and eventually included a billiard room (very fashionable at the time for those who could afford one), 2 bedrooms, an immense marble bath almost large enough for a football team and a turret at the very top of the tower. This edifice was completed in 1874.

Three years ago the insurance company sent a surveyor to look over the house. He told me that he was fairly satisfied with what he saw, but the house would have to be re-wired. He would allow 10 months to complete the job. We began the re-wiring in February 2010 and I believe that we are about 2/3 of the way through.

One of the enduring memories of my childhood and youth in living at Stradey is the sight of buckets and bowls distributed strategically around the staircase in the hall. These became necessary because in times of heavy rainfall the lead which protected the lantern (as architects refer to it) above the staircase began to fail.

When I took over management of the house in 2009 I consulted an architect for assistance. After he had made numerous inspections of the house and prepared a most impressive set of plans he told me that we would have to replace all the lead work in the roof above the hall and would have to replace all the asphalt on the flat roofs of the 1874 extension and on all the balconies. After the news about the re-wiring, this was the proverbial double whammy.

Following multiple crashes in the American property market and mortgage lenders, almost every kind of income in this country

has been reduced. As we have not been exempt from this common experience it has become necessary for us to find ways of raising additional income to contribute towards the costs of running and maintaining Stradey. We have begun to make the house available as a location for wedding photographs. This is proving very popular and it is a great delight to see the enjoyment with which young couples and their families have taken up the opportunity.

The other event which we have begun is to conduct heritage tours around the greater part of the house on the 1st Sunday of each month and every Tuesday, between the beginning of April and the end of October. Each tour begins at 2.30pm. This is something which has always happened from time to time, but my wife Claire and I have decided to make this a regular feature of the household. These tours are enjoyable for everyone. Some people appreciate the architecture, others are especially interested in the art collection (which is very closely involved with my Great Grandfather himself and his artist friends, so it is a very personal and somewhat indigenous collection); and still others are interested in the family story. The tours last for approximately 1 hour and include an opportunity to enjoy a walk around the gardens and a cup of tea and bara brith, welshcakes etc.

At the moment there is no brochure or booklet which I can hand to visitors before they leave. However, I hope that before very long that will be something for visitors to take away with them.

The house has some features that are similar to those at Margam Abbey (the same architect was involved in some of the construction at both houses) and with a National Trust property near Bristol called Tyntesfield. However well intentioned, competent and dedicated to their task organisations such as the National Trust may be (and I for one appreciate the work which they do) all they can really do is to preserve buildings and furniture for the nation. Almost by definition, the families themselves have left. However, in the words of Dafydd Iwan's song "Ry'n ni yma o hyd" and so long as we continue to maintain a family presence at Stradey we will endeavour to maintain not just the house but the household as well.

Patrick Mansel Lewis, Stradey Castle,
Llanelli, SA15 4PL.

Website: www.stradeycastle.com
Email: info@stradeycastle.com
Tel: 01554-774626

Photo credits: Peter Owen Jones | Pure Creations | Claire Mansel Lewis

