

The domination of the Vaughans of Corsygedol

By William H Owen

MANY centuries ago it was referred to as 'an ancient mansion in Merionethshire' and the Vaughans of Corsygedol, Dyffryn Arduwy were an influential family in the county and beyond from the thirteenth century until the last of the family died in 1791.

The author A G Bradley described Corsygedol as 'one of the proudest and oldest seats in all North Wales' when his book, *Highways and Byways in North Wales* was published in 1898. By then the estate was in the hands of another family but as Bradley states it was 'the Vaughans who lorded it right royally for many hundreds of years between the Rhinog mountains and the sea.'

The pedigree of this illustrious Vaughan family famous for their patronage of Welsh itinerant bards as given by Lewis Dwnn, deputy-herald-at-arms in the sixteenth century, begins in the thirteenth century with the union of Osbrwn Wyddel and the daughter and heiress of the old Welsh family of Corsygedol, the daughter being a ward of Llywelyn the Great. Osbrwn Wyddel was Osborne Fitzgerald who had come over from Ireland to fight for Llywelyn Fawr, Llywelyn the Great or Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Llywelyn the Last; some historians believe it is the latter.

Details of the pedigree given to Dwnn by the head of the house, Griffith Vaughan, when he visited Corsygedol in 1588 were himself, Griffith Vaughan, son of Richard, son of Rhys, son of William, son of Griffith Vaughan, esquire of the body to Henry VII, and third son of Griffith, son of



Corsygedol mansion as it is today

Einion, son of Griffith, son of Llywelyn, son of Cynwrig, son of Osbrwn Wyddel. The family estate passed in direct line for fifteen generations until the family died out with the last in the line, Evan Lloyd Vaughan MP, in 1791. Some researchers maintain that everything Dwnn was told was not factually correct. What is certain Griffith Vaughan was the head of the house in 1588, and high sheriff of Merioneth at the time, showing that the Vaughan family were already an influential part of public life in the county. They had assembled a substantial estate by 1525, when the then proprietor, William Vaughan, who had been constable of Cilgerran Castle in Cardiganshire, transferred the ownership to his son, Rhys. MSS (Bangor) Mostyn 379 from that period states:

Mansion house called corsygedol issa and corsygedol ycha lands called tythyn yr owen, tythyn ystymllan, tythyn tyn y tervyn, tythyn enw lewelin, tythyn y Kay Kwitta, tythyn Kayrevel, 100 tenements and 12 orchards containing 3000 acres of land, 1000 acres of meadow, 60

acres of pastuas [sic] 1000 acres of pasture, 1000 acres of wood, 1000 acres of underwood, 60 acres of turbarry and moor etc in the township of Llanddoywe, Llanenddoyn, Llanbeder, Llandanwg, Llanvair, Trawsfynydd, Llanvendigned, Rythgryw, Lloyngwryl, Bodgadvan, Gwyddelvynyth, Gwyrgh and y Vaynol, in the county of Merioneth.

'Tythyn Ystymllan', first named in a deed of 1625, is today Llanddwywe Farm near the church of the same name. It is a sixteenth century farmhouse and one-time public house which was built alongside the original medieval drover's route from Bwlch y Rhiwgyr to Bontddu and Dolgellau. It formed part of the extensive Corsygedol estate and was first recorded in rentals of 1713. The house ceased to be a Public House in 1903. It is a Cadw Listed Building.

Rhys Vaughan is said to be responsible for the building of the earliest part of the new Corsygedol mansion in 1576. Rhys married Gwenhwyfar, the daughter of the Llwyndyrys estate in

Caernarfonshire which added to his domain. She is referred to as Gwen Anwyl and was the mother of Richard Vaughan who drew up the family tree and gave prominence to his mother's side of the family.

The most noted fact regarding Gwen's ancestry, according to William Vaughan, was that she was descended from Sir Griffith Lloyd, knighted by Edward I for bringing him news of the birth of his son in Caernarfon Castle.

One interesting fact is that Rhys Vaughan's Corsygedol was built in the same year as Plas Mawr, Conwy and the author T I Ellis noted the similarities between the two mansions. But less than twenty years later Griffith Vaughan rebuilt Corsygedol in 1592/3, also added the Corsygedol chapel to Llanddwywe church at the bottom of their long drive. Griffith was buried at Llanddwywe in 1616 a year after the chapel was built to commemorate him.

Rhys Vaughan's grandfather, the first Griffith Vaughan, helped to defend Harlech castle against the Yorkists and is said to have built the Tŷ Gwyn at Barmouth to facilitate a Lancastrian invasion. Both Jasper and Henry Tudor are believed to have sought refuge at Corsygedol.

In the seventeenth century William Vaughan (d. 1633) inherited Corsygedol from his father Griffith. He married his cousin Ann, the daughter of Richard Vaughan of Plas Hen, Talhenbont, Llanystumdwy, the estate which his wife inherited. In 1607 he rebuilt Plas Hen. Over

twenty years later he was responsible for building the gate-house at Corsygedol in 1630. It was once believed that Inigo Jones, the royal architect was involved with this project but by now this is not considered to be correct.

It is possible that he knew the architect as he was friendly with many learned friends in England. He was a great friend of Ben Jonson, the poet, who made him a present of his works. Before he was made high sheriff of Merionethshire in 1626 he held the same office in Caernarvonshire in 1613 and 1632.

The London establishment became more aware of Corsygedol when his son Richard Vaughan (d. 1636) entered Parliament as MP for Merioneth, the first of the Vaughans to be elected in preference to the Llwyn or Nannau families from the Dolgellau area. He became known as the most obese member of the House. In 'Archaeologia Cambrensis' it is noted that *he was so very fat and unwieldy that the folding doors of the House of Commons were opened to let him in, which is never done but when the Black Rod brings a message from the king, who being then in the House of Lords, the folding doors opened, when the rumour in the House was, "the Black Rod or the Welsh Knight is coming"*.

He died suddenly during his term of office, on 19 July 1636, apparently from complications arising from an operation performed by a London surgeon at Corsygedol to reduce his girth. When the surgeon completed his work everything seemed well but later he suffered a relapse which led to his death. His wife was Elizabeth, daughter of John Owen, Clenennau, Dolbenmaen and their son, William Vaughan (d. 1669) married Anne, daughter of

the house of Nannau, and thus united two families which had already been on friendly terms. William built additional rooms to Gorsygedol but he died at the young age of 37. Their second son, Richard Vaughan (d. 1734), maintained the line. He also became an MP for Merioneth and was also the Constable of Harlech Castle in 1704 and 1716.

When he inherited the estate in 1698 a list of animals registered at Upper and Lower Corsygedol has survived:

'att Corsygedol Issa
18 cows
12 calves
2 Bulls

Corsygedol ucha
23 Cows
17 calves
14 oxen
48 mountain cattle of all sorts
29 yearling calves
12 working horses
116 milking sheep
337 of other sheep
In all besides lambs 485
14 swine big and small

Richard again had married an estate owner's daughter. His wife Margaret was the daughter of Sir Evan Lloyd of Bodidris, Denbighshire. She considered herself to be superior to the Corsygedol family as she was a descendant of Owain Gwynedd and Owain Glyn Dŵr. They had two sons, William the elder be-



**William Vaughan
1707-1775
who was MP for
Merioneth from
1734 to 1768**

ing the first of the Vaughan family to be sent away to receive formal education. He began his schooling in Chester in 1716 and was sent to a private tutor in London four years later. But he left St John's, Cambridge within a year of entering, presumably because he did not want to graduate. He returned home and like all his predecessors welcomed itinerant bards to sing his praises at Corsygedol.

Unlike many of his contemporaries he could appreciate good Welsh poetry and he attempted to write in 'cynghanedd' himself. He also supported writers of Welsh literature such as the Morris of Anglesey and he corresponded with his great friend, Lewis Morris for thirty years discussing Welsh and English litera-

ture and Welsh antiquities. As a reward for all his support he was awarded the honour of being the first Chief President of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in London in 1751. Before his father's death he had taken his place as the MP for Merioneth and there is plenty of evidence he had the time of his life during his days in London drinking and womanising with Lewis Morris.

The high life may have contributed to his ill health by the end of his days but he did manage to fulfill his duties as MP for 34 years from 1734 to 1768 when he retired. The historian Lewis Lloyd claimed 'his contribution to parliamentary affairs was typically undistinguished, but his interest in county and local matters was considerable.'



The clock-tower at Corsygedol originally built in the seventeenth century but not by Inigo Jones, the royal architect as once believed

His wife was Catherine, also his older cousin, daughter of Hugh Nanney, who became the eventual heiress of Nannau. When his father died he inherited Corsygedol, Plas Hen and Llwyndyrys, together with his wife's inheritance which included Nannau, Dolwcheogryd and Dolau-gwyn, six highly regarded estates in the counties of Merioneth and Caernarfon. Added to this was his own sloop, the Harlech Castle