

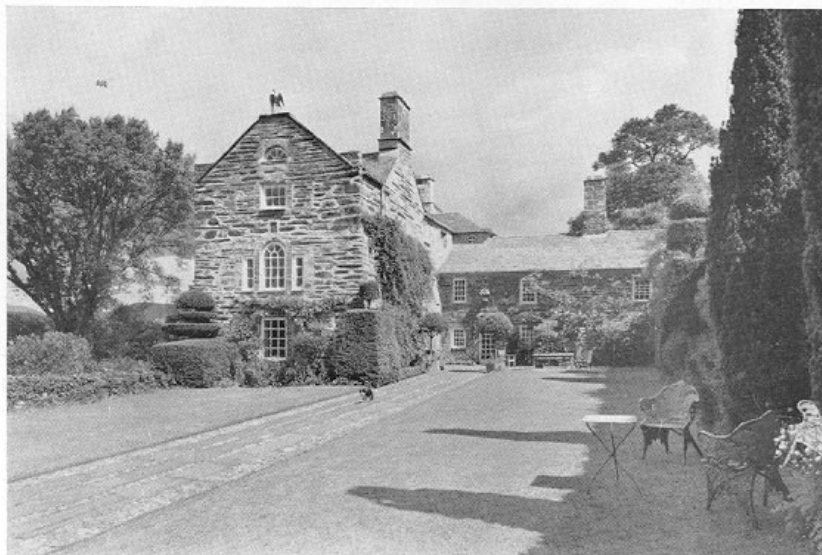
# PLAS BRONDANW, MERIONETH—I

THE HOME OF MR. CLOUGH WILLIAMS-ELLIS By CHRISTOPHER HUSSEY

In 1951 the 17th-century and earlier house (pronounced "Brondanno"), which Mr. Williams-Ellis inherited and began restoring in 1908, was burnt out. The reconstruction now depicted was completed by 1953

THE road led along the edge of Traeth Mawr, a vast arm of the sea. As they looked upwards with their backs to the sea they beheld a scene which no other in this country can parallel. Precipices intersected with torrents formed the barrier on the left; on the right the triple summit of Moelwyn reared its majestic boundary; in the depth was the wild and stormy outline of the Snowdonian chain. The mountain frame remains unchanged, unchangeable; but the quid mirror it enclosed is gone." So Peacock, in 1816, described the estuary which Brondanw overlooked from its eastern slope (Fig. 4), but which was then to be reclaimed by farms by the Portmadoc Embankment. That great work, providing communication between Caernarvonshire and Merioneth across the mouth of the Glasfryn, and later for the export of Festiniog slate from the new Portmadoc, was promoted by the enterprising Mr. Maddox, inspired by pioneer work in rebanking undertaken by William Williams, of Brondanw. In the controversy it aroused, Peacock, then living at Tremadoc, supported the scheme for its enlightenment. Peacock weighed against its destruction of beauty; and, perhaps, the most permanently rewarding outcome of it was his gathering of the famous *cognoscenti* in Headlong Hall.

Peacock may have endowed Squire Headlong with some of Maddox's and William Williams's optimism; and it is possible not to be reminded of that



1.—THE UPPER LAWN AND ENTRANCE PATH TO THE OLD WING

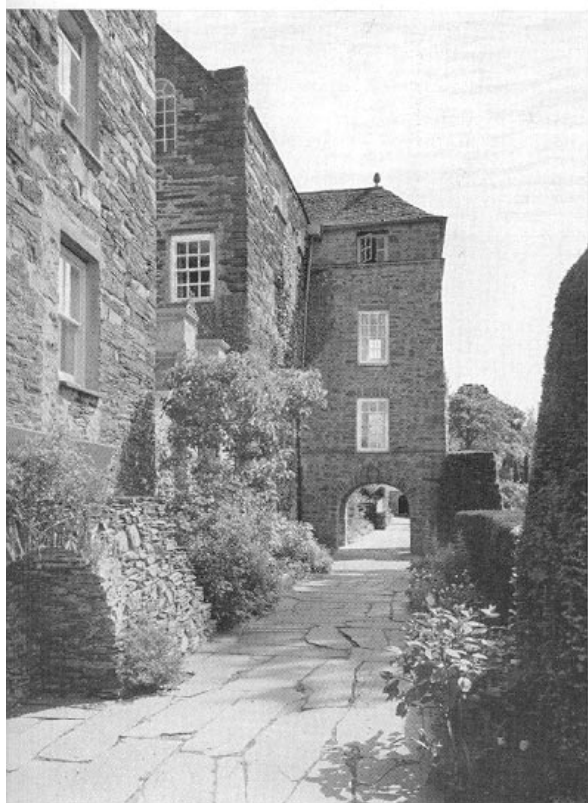
engaging enthusiast by some of the activities of the latter's descendant in the neighbourhood. But there the analogy between imaginary Headlong Hall and Brondanw ends.

The little rock-girt estate belonged since at least the 15th century to a family of which the representative, when surnames were adopted by the Welsh in the 17th century, assumed one of his father's and became William Williams. The two-storeyed house, with walls of slate slabs, that he lived in survives as the low wing on the right of Fig. 1, containing what is now the dining-room, with its huge hearth arch (Fig. 9). It was Robert Williams his successor who, about 1660, built at right angles to this, and rising from the slope below it, a four-storeyed "mansion" (Fig. 3). Towards the end of the 18th century the later William Williams (d. 1778), who began reclamation of the Traeth, introduced Georgian chimney-pieces and woodwork in the more important rooms. But, though he improved his fortune by marrying successive heiresses, he left no descendant. So when his sister died in 1806, she bequeathed Brondanw to a great-niece,

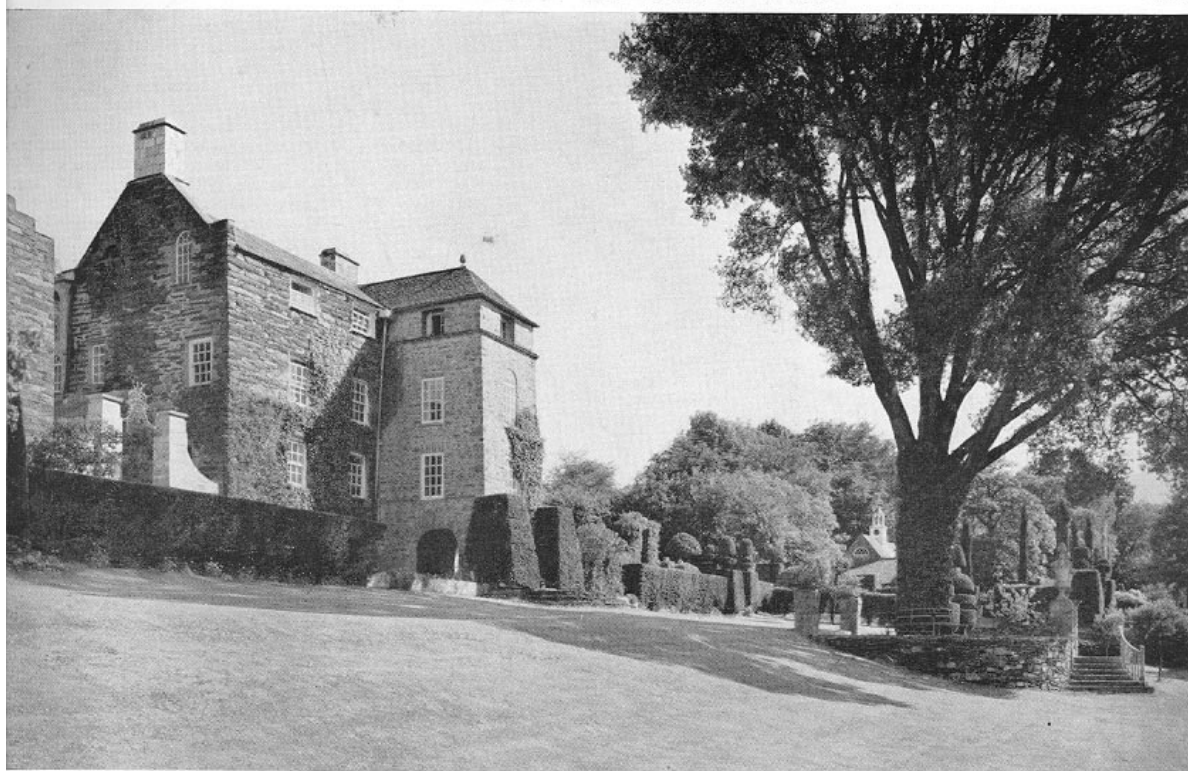
Miss Jane Bulgen, on condition that she added to her name that of Williams. In 1807 Jane married her second cousin, the Rev. Thomas Ellis, of Glasfryn, who so became Williams-Ellis. She was his second wife, and he was old enough to be her father, having, in fact, christened her. The Rev. Thomas was succeeded by the present squire's grandfather, John Williams-Ellis, married to Ellen Clough, heiress of Plas Clough. He brought up his children by her at Brondanw, but, on succeeding his father at Glasfryn in Caernarvonshire, quitted his Merioneth home, which gradually deteriorated into tenements. This was its condition when, in 1908, his successor made over Brondanw to his second surviving son, Clough.

In a quasi-autobiography titled *The Architect*, published 25 years ago, he has described his excitement at thus becoming guardian of the romantic old family place; how he got possession of one of the seven tenements it contained and found two carpenter brothers and a stone mason, who contracted to begin work on restoring the house. "It has been going on fairly continuously except for the (first) war ever since," he wrote, more prophetically than he knew. True, the masons' and carpenters' successors, including three generations of the Davies family, were turned on to another undertaking, which arose from the squire's finding a place on the tide-way to berth his boat: a Victorian house called Aberia that he re-named Portmeirion. What that led to is now well known, and kept them busy enough till the next war. Then, one midnight in the winter of 1950-51, the chimney in the library at Brondanw caught alight. By next morning the fire, fanned by a full gale, had burnt itself and the house clean out, despite the efforts of five fire brigades, summoned too late because the telephone had been one of the first casualties. Little more than the three-foot thick outer walls remained of what had been a home for 400 years and its architect-owner's for 40.

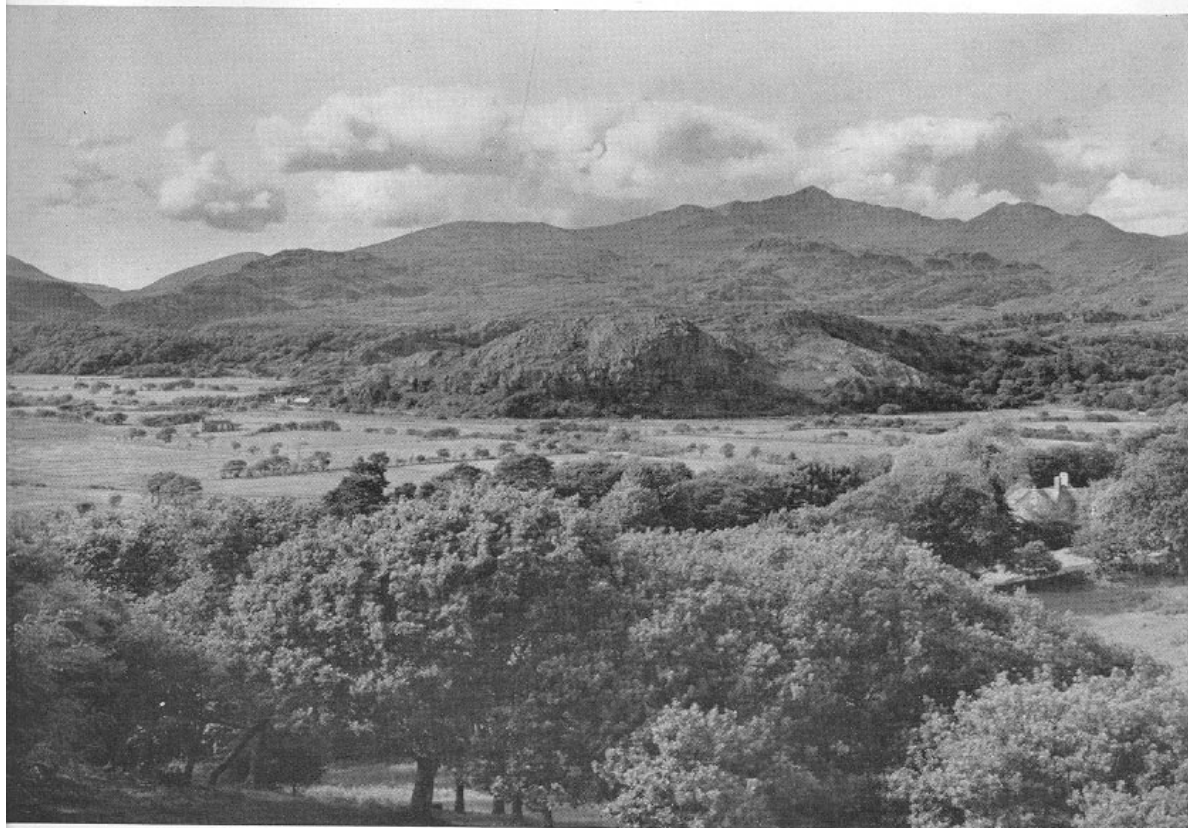
I had visited the family there not



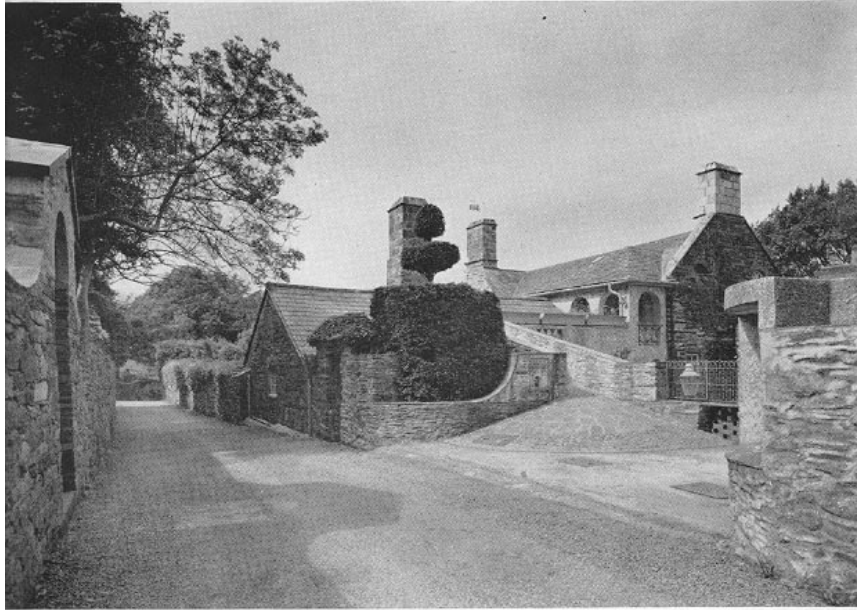
2.—BELOW THE WEST SIDE OF THE "MANSION." The projection spanning the terrace was added in 1937 to buttress the front, which can be seen to be inclining outwards



3.—THE 1660 WEST FRONT AND ITS "BUTTRESS," FROM THE LAWN



4.—TRAETH MAWR AND MOEL HEBOG, FROM THE OUTLOOK TOWER ABOVE THE HOUSE, WHICH IS GLIMPSED BELOW ON THE RIGHT



THE ENTRANCE TO THE NEW TOP-FLOOR FLAT FROM THE ROAD ABOVE AND BEHIND THE HOUSE

frequently, and described here in 1931 both the old house as they delightfully inhabited it and the terraced, view-hedged garden taking shape on the hillside below. Their disaster seemed the more complete at a time when rationing controlled private building to a few hundred pounds' worth. But almost at once one heard that it was hoped to rebuild the house.

In fact, on the following day the faithful state masons had begun clearing and

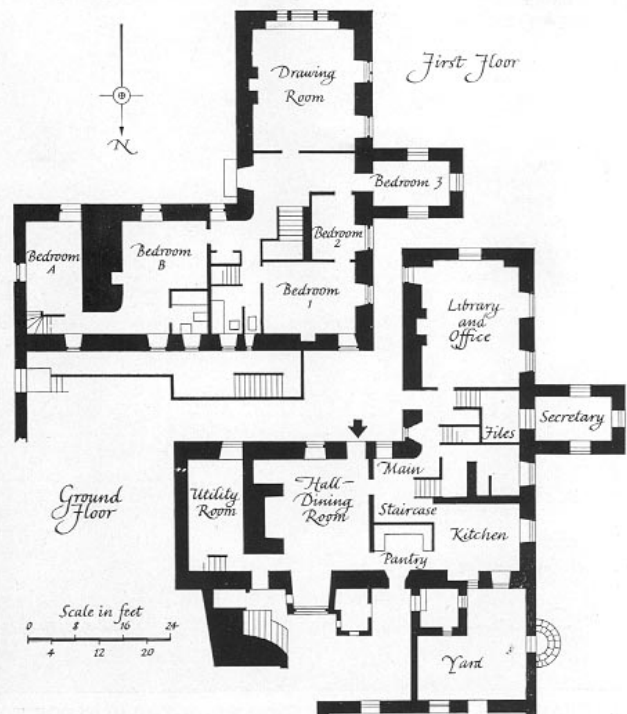
propping and giving first aid, in preparation for a licence to rebuild; and, through the help of various interested amenity and historical bodies, this quickly materialised. Considering all that Mr. Williams-Ellis had and has done for architecture and preservation in Wales, and that the bulk of the material and labour was home-produced, the authorities could scarcely have withheld it. Nevertheless, it constituted a greatly encouraging gesture, not only to the principal sufferers,

but to many who were beginning to despair of home-wrought, personal, vernacular building ever being undertaken again. In two years the little estate gang, periodically augmented by specialists as required but otherwise working in much the same way as their 17th-century forbears, celebrated completion of the work by a party in the Brondanw they had reconstructed. Their names are carved at the foot of a flaming urn (Fig. 6) erected where much of the debris had been spread out and where, typically of its designer, a considerable object was required to terminate one of his new vistas, an avenue of chestnuts prolonging the axis of the approach to the front door. Another form that a memorial of Brondanw's resurrection might have taken, Mr. Williams-Ellis has remarked, is "the family eagle that, perched on the main south-west gable (Fig. 1), survived the fire unscathed. It deserves to have gilded flames added to its base and to continue to preside as a certified phoenix."

I notice that it was not there in 1931, having been a subsequent addition; and so was the feature which most differentiates the present house from that described 25 years ago: the bastion-like projection buttressing the middle of the west front (Fig. 3). That had been necessitated in 1937 when an outward bulge in the west wall became acute, and has enhanced the appearance of the house as surely as its stability. It also serves visually to weld the house into the garden: its arches span the lower terrace and form a porch for the lower entrance into what was anciently the



6. THE FIRE MONUMENT

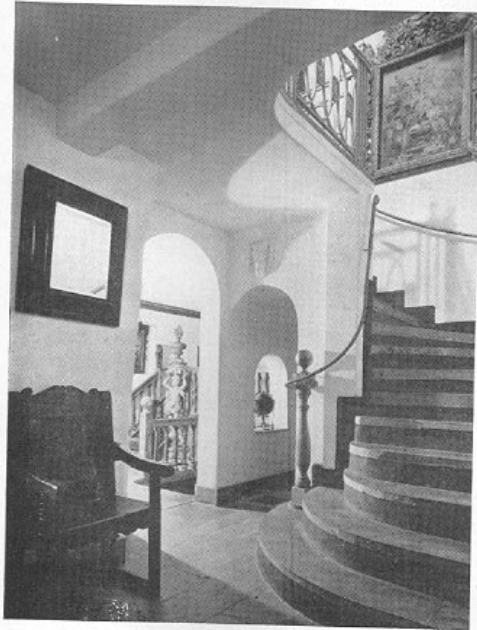


7.—GROUND-FLOOR PLAN



brewhouse (and is actually little changed). Incidentally, the photograph of the arches (Fig. 11) well illustrates Mr. Williams-Ellis's way of handling the rough brown and green slabs of the local stone, which gives such satisfactory texture to old and new work alike.

Rebuilding was made the opportunity of replanning the house in important respects, besides making minor modifications to its appearance. Among the latter, the chimneys are new and higher; the venetian window in Fig. 1, lighting the drawing-room, is an innovation—a fractured lintel and collapsed walling afforded pretext for the change; the low east range has been covered with the little grey-green Plecely slates in place of the large blue ones with which it had at some time been re-roofed. The chief change of plan was the reconstruction of the top floor and attic as a separate

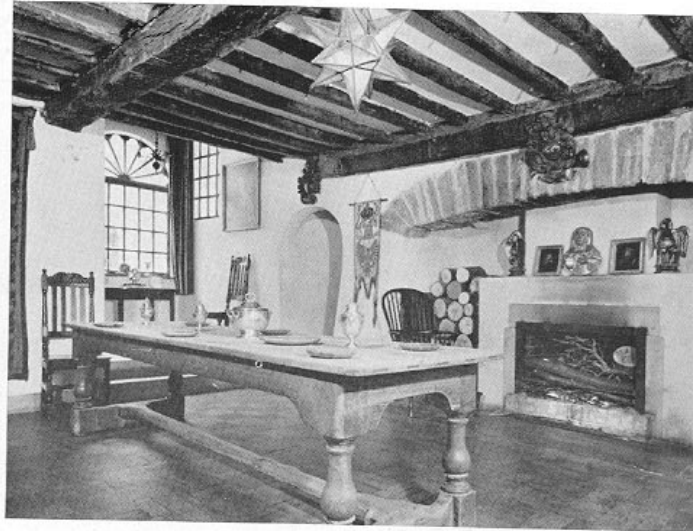


8.—THE NEW STONE STAIRCASE, SEEN FROM THE DINING-ROOM

self-contained flat, equipped, as its designer expresses it, "to receive friends for holidays in a way that relieves both hosts and guests of the responsibilities normally attaching to the relationship." Access to it is from the steeply rising ground behind the house, where a stone arched bridge, carried over the back entrance to the house itself, leads to a roof terrace connected with a loggia and so into the top storey (Fig. 5).

In the ground-floor plan the main changes have been the provision of direct access from the kitchen to the hall-dining-room (Fig. 9) through a new pantry which occupies what was previously an unwanted half of the staircase hall. The dining-room had not been entirely destroyed, and its furniture, including the high-backed chairs actually made for the house in the 17th century, was saved. Stone stairs (Fig. 8) replace the old oak ones and are turned the reverse way, making room for a cloakroom beneath them approached by an arched tunnel. Upstairs, the drawing-room looks superficially much as before (Fig. 10). All its former contents were lost, but happily could be replaced with not dissimilar things mobilised from elsewhere. Its architectural features are different, yet still much the same, having emanated from the stock of such things at Portmeirion. But both floors have been so arranged that they could, if necessary, be subdivided again to make two maisonnettes, each occupying one of the wings. Next week the garden and surroundings will be described. They were not, of course, affected by the fire; but after 45 years of "one thing leading to another," they are now among the most notable creations of their kind: which is no less romantic than were some of Squire Headlong's projects, though in a different way.

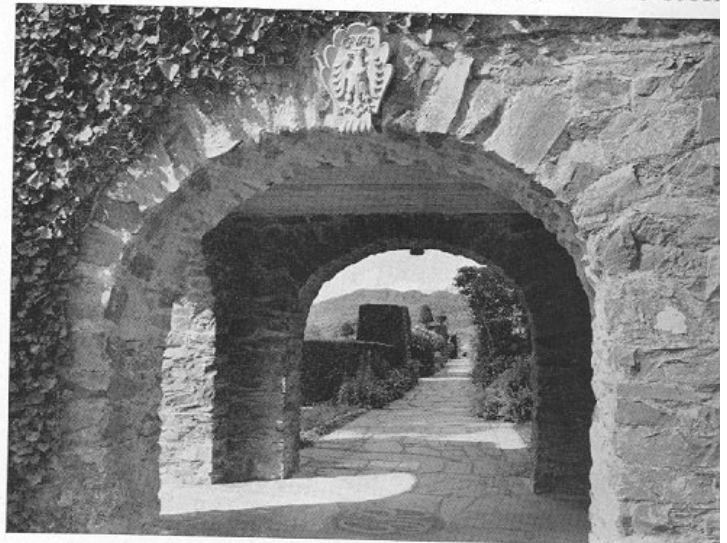
(To be concluded)



9.—THE HALL-DINING-ROOM, WITH ORIGINAL 17th-CENTURY FURNITURE



10.—THE DRAWING-ROOM ON THE FIRST FLOOR, LOOKING SOUTH



11.—ARCHES OF THE "BUTTRESS," LOOKING NORTH