

## Pant-yr-Ochain: the chief house in Gresford

by CHRISTOPHER J. WILLIAMS

To be published in *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions*, Vol 51, in 2003



Pant-yr-Ochain Hall is well known today as a country house, now a pub, between Gresford and Wrexham. The building is beautifully situated in a hollow (the 'Pant' in its Welsh name), overlooking a lake and approached by a winding drive from the Old Wrexham Road. The part of the house now occupied by the pub is mostly of early nineteenth-century date, with painted render walls and attractively shaped gables, one of them dated 1835. But a glance at the back from the lawn reveals timbers of the seventeenth century, to which the Victorians have added more timber framing. Seventeenth-century timber can also be seen inside the house at the rear, and on the older farmhouse that lies hidden behind the hall.<sup>1</sup> For over two centuries, from 1708 to 1921, the house and farm were part of the Acton Hall estate. In the eighteenth century it was simply a tenanted farmhouse, but in 1785 it was purchased by Sir Foster Cunliffe, who added substantially to it. The ownership of the house can be traced from the 1550s to the present day. Since 1785 it has changed hands only once!

A. N. Palmer called Pant-yr-Ochain 'the chief house in Gresford',<sup>2</sup> and pointed out that it was once a far more important house than Acton Hall.<sup>3</sup> Saxton's map of Denbighshire in 1577 shows 'Pentiocken' as one of the few great houses in the Wrexham area, others being Trevalyn, Almere and Hafod-y-Wern. Ogilby's road map of 1675 shows it, with Acton, beside the old road that ran from Gresford village past the Flash to Wrexham.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite its obvious importance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are very few references to the house in print. It is mentioned briefly in Peter Smith's *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (2nd ed, 1988) as a half-timbered house. Edward Hubbard's *The Buildings of Wales: Clwyd* (1986) makes no mention of it at all. Palmer printed a history of the house in his *Thirteen Country Townships*,<sup>5</sup> but this was based mainly on the account printed by J.Y.W. Lloyd in *Powys Fadog*.<sup>6</sup> Palmer said almost nothing about it after 1785, when it was bought by Sir Foster Cunliffe. He failed to appreciate that, after the Cunliffes added to

it in the early nineteenth century, it was two properties: the hall, approached by the drive now used by the pub, and the farmhouse behind, with separate access from the Old Wrexham Road, and hidden from view from the grounds of the hall by a long brick wall. But Palmer did include a pen and ink drawing of the house, by Philip Yorke of Erthig, which probably dates from the 1870s, and is the earliest detailed illustration of the house known.

The name *Pant-yr-ochain* means ‘the hollow of lamentation’, which is hardly an appropriate name for a building devoted to eating and drinking. Originally it was called *Pant Iocyn*, ‘Iocyn’s hollow’, Iocyn being a popular medieval Welsh Christian name. It may have come from the Latin *jocundus*, ‘happy’.<sup>7</sup> Nothing is known of the Iocyn after whom *Pant-yr-Ochain* is named, but he may have been one of the early Welsh settlers who came to the area in the early middle ages. Only in the 1830s was the name *Pant-yr-ochain* invented, and adopted by the Ordnance Survey, but various spellings of the old form remained in use until recent times.

### *The Almers*

In the 1550s a house was built at *Pant Iocyn* by Edward Almer, a man active in east Denbighshire politics, who was sheriff of Denbighshire in 1553 and MP for the county in 1555. At the time of Domesday Book in 1086, *Gresford* was in the Anglicized region east of the *Dyke* that was included under *Cheshire*. Soon afterwards, the Welsh from the *Vale of Clwyd* reconquered it, and the area again became Welsh-speaking, as it was to remain for many centuries.<sup>8</sup> The Almer family was descended from *Ithel ap Eunydd*, one of these Welsh conquerors. The first of the family to adopt an English surname was *John Almer*, a marshal of the hall at the court of *Henry VII*. His surname came from the place where he lived, at *Almer* (now *Almere*) on the Welsh bank of the river *Dee*, two miles downstream of *Holt*.<sup>9</sup> *Almere* was in the parish of *Gresford*, but the nearest village was *Churton* in *Cheshire*, to which a ferry took passengers across the river until the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> *Almer* obtained for his sons *John* and *William* posts as sergeants at arms at the court of *Henry VIII*.<sup>11</sup> *Edward Almer*, grandson of the first *John Almer*, became an important member of the east Denbighshire gentry, marrying *Dorothy*, daughter of *George Calverley* of *Lea* in *Cheshire*. It was *Edward Almer* who established the family at *Pant Iocyn*. This was in a much more convenient and attractive position than his house at *Almere*, which was low-lying and prone to flooding. He took the materials from the house at *Almere* to build his new house. *Pant Iocyn* was said to have once belonged to a family called *Carrat*, but *Almer* certainly added considerably to it, if he did not completely rebuild it.<sup>12</sup> The move probably took place about 1555, when he was elected MP for Denbighshire. When he served for the first time as sheriff of the county, in 1553, he was still at *Almere*, but by 1558, the first year of the reign of *Elizabeth I*, when he was again sheriff, he was living at *Pant Iocyn*.<sup>13</sup> He held the office of deputy to *Sir George Cotton* of *Combermere*, *Cheshire*, as steward of the lordships of *Bromfield* and *Yale*, and keeper of *Holt Castle*. In the mid-1540s *Almer* was accused of removing from the castle windows, glass and lead for his house, and of embezzling rents and other monies. His defence was that the glass, lead, etc, came from the dissolved monasteries of *Valle Crucis* and *Combermere*.<sup>14</sup> Some of these materials seem to have been taken to *Pant Iocyn*, where ornate pieces of stonework have come to light from time to time. Chief among these items is a fragment of a sepulchral slab, now preserved in *Gresford church*, which was found in the nineteenth century in the foundations of an old barn at *Pant Iocyn*.<sup>15</sup> It has been assumed that this came from *Gresford church*, and related to an early owner of *Pant Iocyn*, but it is more likely that it was among the items taken

by Almer from Valle Crucis, where there are many similar slabs still to be seen. Once the move to Pant Iocyn had taken place, the Almers sold their lands beside the Dee. In 1561 Edward and William Almer sold lands in Allington to John Trevor of Trevalyn.<sup>16</sup> The site of their house at Almere passed to the Pulestons, then to the Powells of Horsley, and eventually to the Grosvenor estate.<sup>17</sup>

It was in the time of Edward Almer, and of his son William, who succeeded his father as MP for Denbighshire in 1572, that Pant Iocyn became one of the chief gentry houses of east Denbighshire. In the reign of Elizabeth, west Denbighshire was dominated by the Salusburys of Lleweni and the Thelwalls of Plas-y-Ward, who controlled Ruthin.<sup>18</sup> In east Denbighshire, the only family of comparable status was the Pulestons. Their main seat was Emral, at Worthenbury in the detached Maelor hundred of Flintshire, but they had minor branches in the Wrexham area. In east Denbighshire, the lack of great families of major influence resulted in the dominance of smaller ones, descended from the old Welsh aristocracy, and still Welsh-speaking, such as the Trevors of Trevalyn and the Lloyds of Bodidris. The Almers were one of these families, having won preferment at court under the Tudors and built a new house at Pant Iocyn to emphasize their newly-won status. Another was the Breretons of Borrás, a branch of an old-established Cheshire family, who had acquired the Borrás estate after it was forfeited by the original owners when they supported Glynd\_r. Unlike west Denbighshire, with its important borough towns of Denbigh and Ruthin, the east had no borough other than Holt, right on the border, and inhabited by imported English burgesses. Wrexham was the biggest town. It did not become a borough until 1857, but it was an important market town, in which the local gentry kept up town houses. The Almers intermarried with some of the other dominant families; William Almer married a Puleston of Hafod-y-Wern, Wrexham. The great Denbighshire families accepted the religious changes brought in after the Reformation. In politics the Almers were allied with the Salusburys and Pulestons, but William Almer appears to have been a litigious man, who quarrelled with his influential neighbours. In the 1570s the family's religious allegiance was still dubious, but after missionary Roman Catholic priests arrived, they became staunchly Protestant. One of these priests, Richard Gwyn, the Catholic martyr, tried to convert Breretons, Lloyds and Pulestons, but without any success. He was persecuted by Pulestons and a Thelwall, imprisoned in Wrexham, and hanged, drawn and quartered in the town in 1584. William Almer was the foreman of the jury that condemned him.<sup>19</sup>

In 1588, the year of the Armada, William Almer again sought election as MP for Denbighshire, with the support of the Salusburys. He was defeated by John Edwards of Chirk, supported by Pulestons and Trevors. Almer challenged the return in the court of Star Chamber, and the documents resulting were used by the historian of the reign of Elizabeth, Sir John Neale, in a detailed study of three Welsh county elections.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, Almer filed a petition in Star Chamber in the preceding year over an affray in Wrexham on market day. His enemies on that day were to be his opponents in the election—Breretons, Pulestons and Trevors, he complained, had long envied him and sought his blood. In the election case it was said that men boasted: 'There will be a Puleston in Emral, a Brereton in Borrás, and a Trevor in Trevalyn, when there will be no Almer in Pantyokin.'<sup>21</sup> Almer's 'conditions and behaviour', his enemies claimed, 'were so lewd and unseemly for his calling, being a justice of the peace, and he himself given to quarrels and contentions, as that he was like to set all the gentlemen in the shire together by the ears.' It was thought that he sought election 'only to the end to have the country's money to maintain his brabbling

causes in London.<sup>22</sup> The election was to be held in the shire hall in Wrexham, at the top of the High Street, on the site that was later occupied by the town hall demolished in 1940. Almer, having the support of the Salusburys, believed that he could count on 1,600 votes, and could not be beaten by fair means. The election was to be held between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, and Almer took precautions against trickery from the Edwards camp by packing the hall with his supporters by eight. John and Robert Salusbury met the sheriff, Owen Brereton, at the edge of the town to escort him to the shire hall, but Brereton, who was one of Almer's enemies, pleaded business to transact and entered his lodging with Roger Puleston. Puleston went into the under-sheriff's room, and then left the house with that official, taking the election writ with him. They walked to the house of one William Edwards, on the outskirts of town, and held the election there. Edwards was the uncle of Almer's opponent; he was also related to Almer, but there had been a feud between them for two years since their servants had assaulted one another in the court of Great Sessions, in front of the justices. The house had been packed with Edwards's men, and armed guards posted to keep out the Almer supporters should they try to break in. These manoeuvres succeeded. The election was held, and Edwards was declared the winner. When nine o'clock came, Almer's men retired to a field adjoining the church, where their leader counted them and thanked them for their support. His subsequent legal challenge to these proceedings came to nothing.

William Almer was succeeded at Pant Iocyn by his son, another William, and then by the latter's only daughter and heir, Jane, who married Gilbert Gerard. He was the son of Sir William Gerard (d.1581), a lawyer who had been both MP for Chester and its recorder, vice-president of the Council of Wales and the Marches, and Lord Chancellor of Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Gilbert and Jane Gerard's son, William, seems to have had financial difficulties. He mortgaged Pant Iocyn for £1,000, and eventually sold it in 1613 to Nathaniel Owens for £1,200. In the following year this man again sold it for £1,300 to John Panton, who in the following year covenanted to pay £10 a year to the widow of Gilbert Gerard.

Our main source for the ownership of the house in the seventeenth century is a manuscript family history, compiled by Sir Foster Cunliffe, who bought the Acton Hall estate in 1785. This appears to have drawn on deeds and documents relating to the estate that have since disappeared.<sup>24</sup> Sir Foster's account has been used by later writers. His daughter Emma, who lived at Pant-yr-Ochain, published an extract from it in the *Gresford Parish Magazine* in 1873.<sup>25</sup> The Chevalier Lloyd drew on it for his account of the Almers in his *Powys Fadog* in 1882,<sup>26</sup> and Lloyd's version was used and expanded by A.N. Palmer in his section on the house in his *History of the Thirteen Country Townships* in 1903.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Bishop Lloyd and the Robinsons*

In 1615 Pant Iocyn was purchased from John Panton for £1,400 by George Lloyd, the Bishop of Chester.<sup>28</sup> Lloyd was a Caernarfonshire man, who had been Bishop of Chester since 1604. He is said 'to have treated the nonconforming clergy of his diocese with much leniency, protecting them as much as he could from persecution'.<sup>29</sup> Bishop Lloyd is associated with one of the finest timber-framed buildings in Chester, Bishop Lloyd's House on the south side of Watergate Street. The house is dated 1615, the same year in which he bought Pant Iocyn. He did not own either house for long, for he died in August of that year. In fact, the association of the Chester house with the bishop rests on the Lloyd arms carved on it, together with the Legs of Man, for Lloyd had previously been Bishop of Sodor and Man.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, his family lived

at Pant Iocyn until 1630. In 1620 the owner was given in John Norden's survey of Bromfield and Yale as David Lloyd, the bishop's son, who had married Mary Gerard.<sup>31</sup> Legal papers and correspondence drawn up in the years before Bishop Lloyd's widow, Anne, sold the house in 1630 reveal that she was left with many children, and was beset by financial problems in the years that she spent at Pant Iocyn.<sup>32</sup> Soon after the bishop bought it in 1615 she sold off a barn, and then all the timber growing on the property. She tried to sell a piece of land called Cae Hillock, adjoining the Chester to Wrexham road near the bottom of the present Hillock Lane, which presumably takes its name from it. She let the buildings go out of repair to such an extent that it was estimated that £200 would be needed to put them right. Surveys of Pant Iocyn in these years provide details of the house and the lands belonging to it. Apart from the house itself, the property included a stable, a brick kiln, brewhouse, a malthouse of three bays, a brick dove house, and two barns, one of four and the other of two bays. There was also a hop yard. In 1629 the lands belonging to the house were worth nearly £50 a year. Many of the fields had Welsh names, evidence that the Welsh language was still familiar to those living in Gresford. This was clearly a wet period. The compiler of one survey of the estate, John Edwards of Stansty, noted that much of the land was 'in bog and water', and the two lakes were much in evidence—Pwll Gwennlian, now known as the Flash, and Llyn Llongmere, the lake overlooked by the house.<sup>33</sup> In Norden's survey of Bromfield and Yale in 1620 the lands amounted to 96 customary, or 203 statute acres.<sup>34</sup>

In the next half century the house changed hands four times. In 1630 the Lloyds sold it to a man called Thomas Manley, who made considerable improvements. In 1805, when he renewed the old floors in the house, Sir Foster Cunliffe found coins of the reign of Charles I. It was rumoured in early 1651 that Colonel John Jones of Maesygarneidd, one of those who had signed the death warrant of Charles I, had been about to buy the house for £1,000, but that a Mr Howell Lloyd was then interested in it.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, in 1654<sup>36</sup> it was sold to a William Jones, esq. William Jones was still the owner in 1661, when the tenant was a John Davies, who was also there in 1663.<sup>37</sup> Jones's trustees sold Pant Iocyn to William Challoner of Bushbury in Staffordshire. A Richard Challoner, merchant, occupied the house in 1668, in which year it was sold to Timothy Myddelton of Plas Cadwgan for £2,000. He was the seventh son of Sir Thomas Myddelton of Chirk Castle, the Parliamentary general. After his death, in 1670, his widow married Thomas Powell of Horsley, Gresford. She died in 1675,<sup>38</sup> but her husband continued to live at Pant Iocyn until at least 1678. Some idea of the size of the house is given by the hearth tax returns in 1670, when Thomas Powell had fifteen hearths in Pant Iocyn, while at Acton Hall there were only eleven. Anne, the only daughter of Timothy Myddelton, married in 1682 William Robinson, the eldest son of John Robinson of Gwersyllt, the Civil War Royalist colonel. As a result of this marriage, Pant Iocyn passed to the Robinson family.

#### *The Acton Hall estate*

John Robinson (1687–1732), the son of William Robinson and Anne Myddelton, married in 1708 Elizabeth, the eldest surviving daughter of Sir Griffith Jeffreys of Acton Hall, Wrexham.<sup>39</sup> On the death of her brother, Robert, in 1714, she and her two sisters became joint heiresses of Acton house and estate.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the marriage in 1708 the marriage settlement recorded that Pant Iocyn was then occupied by a tenant, Solomon Russell.<sup>41</sup> John Robinson and his wife lived at Pant Iocyn until 1730, when they left to live at Gwersyllt. This was a significant date in the history of the house, for it then ceased to be a gentleman's residence, and became merely a

farmhouse on the Acton estate. As such, it would have remained unimproved and occupied by tenants for the rest of the century. Since the Acton estate had no male heir, but three heiresses, a private Act of Parliament was obtained in 1745;<sup>42</sup> this appointed commissioners (one of them being Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn) to sell the Jeffreys and Robinson estates. In 1747 the commissioners sold the Jeffreys estate in Acton, Wrexham and Borrass for £4,784. The purchaser was Ellis Yonge of Bryn Iorcyn, Hope, who had married Dorothy Robinson, the daughter of John Robinson and Elizabeth, née Jeffreys. Two years later, in 1749, Yonge bought Pant Iocyn also for £1,395. He lived at Acton Hall, which was by then the grander house, and Pant Iocyn continued to be occupied by a tenant. After Yonge's death, in 1785, both estates were sold for £27,000 to Sir Foster Cunliffe.<sup>43</sup>

For much of the eighteenth century Pant Iocyn was occupied by a family of farmers called Thomas. A Daniel Thomas of Pantyockin, yeoman, is mentioned in 1714.<sup>44</sup> A John Thomas, probably of the same family, was in residence by 1757.<sup>45</sup> In 1768 the Quarter Sessions records show that a servant of his, Mary Williams, stole some clothes belonging to Thomas's wife. She confessed her crime, and was sentenced to be publicly whipped in Wrexham High Street.<sup>46</sup> John Thomas's will, made in 1794, reveals that he owned five properties in Hope Street, Wrexham; these, with the live and dead stock on the farm, were to be sold, and the proceeds divided among his five children.<sup>47</sup> He died in 1802.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Cunliffes*

Sir Foster Cunliffe (1755–1834), who bought Acton Hall and Pant Iocyn in 1785, was a wealthy and cultivated man. His grandfather, the first Foster Cunliffe (1682–1758), was descended from a Lancashire family, and had made a considerable fortune in the slave trade in Liverpool. During the eighteenth century Liverpool rose from being little more than a fishing village to become the biggest port in Britain after London, and in this rise the slave trade played a major part. Liverpool's importance depended on its position, for the slave trade was an Atlantic one. Liverpool was further north than Bristol, which was briefly the main slave port, and was therefore less vulnerable in time of war. In addition, Liverpool was close to the Isle of Man, where captains could land their returning cargoes and evade duty on them.<sup>49</sup> The traders left Liverpool for the west coast of Africa, where they purchased their slaves, and carried them, tightly packed in slave decks, to the West Indies and America. Sugar was brought back, and in addition the Liverpool merchants supplied the plantation owners with luxury goods. Colossal fortunes could be made. By the early 1750s Foster Cunliffe was the chief slave trader in Liverpool, with between twenty and thirty ships. His grandson estimated that he left £200,000, his stock in trade alone being worth half of that sum.<sup>50</sup> He was mayor of the town on three occasions, and his son, Sir Ellis Cunliffe, was MP for Liverpool 1755–67. The family is still remembered by a Cunliffe Street, off Tithe Barn Street in Liverpool. There is good reason to believe that Foster Cunliffe's grandson, Sir Foster Cunliffe, was anxious to conceal the origin of the family fortune, for although he left a detailed history of his family, the word slavery is never once mentioned in it. He recorded that he still had many of his grandfather's letters, but after abstracting the details that he wanted from these, he destroyed them.<sup>51</sup>

Sir Foster Cunliffe was living at the family residence at Saughton in Cheshire when he bought the Acton estate, but within a few years he had added substantially to the existing house; the architect is believed to have been James Wyatt.<sup>52</sup> Sir Foster had

eleven children, and it was on account of his four daughters that he decided to build another new house at Pant y Ochin, as he called it. In his family history, in 1802, he described the contents of his new will. His daughters were approaching marriageable age, and he recorded his concerns over the fate of those who remained unmarried:

Having frequently had occasion to see and lament the deplorable situation of young unmarried women who upon the death of their parents were often obliged to quit the family house, without knowing where to live, and perhaps obliged to seek a home at a distance from their former connections and early attachments; and reflecting that my own daughters might soon be in this predicament, I determined to adopt some plan, which should remedy this inconvenience, and by making them more independent, render their lives happier.<sup>53</sup>

In his will, he left to each of his daughters, as to the rest of his younger children, the sum of £4,000 each, to be paid on coming of age or marrying. In addition, he left £10,000 to trustees, the interest on which was to go to those of his daughters who remained unmarried, for their lives. This annuity was to commence on the death of their mother, and the capital sum was to revert to the estate on the death or marriage of the surviving daughter. He looked around for a comfortable residence in the neighbourhood for his daughters. This, he decided, he could do:

. . . by taking part of the house at Pant y Ochin, which is, in its present state, much too large for a farmer, and converting it into a commodious dwelling, and giving to it as much land as such a residence requires. If hereafter they sh[oul]d not chuse to live there, an accommodation may take place, and the house may be pulled down.<sup>54</sup>

This plan he carried out in 1805. One wing of the old L-shaped farmhouse was enlarged by building a new front onto it in a Jacobean style. This is now the entrance to the pub; the bar at the rear is in one wing of the farmhouse, whose roof was raised to match that of the new extension. The enlarged house was approached by a new, winding drive from the Old Wrexham Road. This narrow lane had by then been replaced as the main road from Chester to Wrexham by a new road to the west. This removed the traffic from the old road, adding to the attraction of the house as a quiet country residence, within easy reach of Acton Hall. By this time, the example of the Ladies of Llangollen at Plas Newydd had made it respectable for unmarried women to set up house together. The style of the new house at Pant Iocyn may have been influenced by the picturesque cottages on the Trevalyn estate in Marford, nearby.<sup>55</sup>

Sir Foster Cunliffe died at Acton Hall in June 1834, and since his wife had died earlier, it was probably at this time that his two unmarried daughters, Emma (1792–1878) and Charlotte (1793–1875) moved into their new home. They extended the house by adding on the large, pleasant room overlooking the lake, now known as the Library. Their arms with the date 1835 may be seen on the gable of this new extension. At some stage in their occupation of the house they added the porch and bay windows to the front of the house, giving it its present appearance.<sup>56</sup> It was at this juncture that the sisters changed the name of the house to its modern form, Pant-yr-Ochain. The new name appeared on the Ordnance Survey one-inch map of 1838, and has always been so given on its later maps, but the name seems to have been pronounced and spelt the old way (even by the sisters) until recently. The house was

called Plas Issa on the tithe map of 1844, presumably to distinguish it from the farmhouse, but this name did not last for long.

Emma and Charlotte Cunliffe lived in some style, as befitted their status. Their brother, after all, owned the grandest house in the area, and one of their sisters had married Charles Watkin Williams-Wynn, a prominent statesman. The sisters had six servants, including a housekeeper, lady's maid, coachman and footman living in.<sup>57</sup> They entertained and visited other great families in the area. A favourite occupation of the wealthy of this period was archery. The Society of Royal British Bowmen was formed at Acton in 1787, and the Cunliffes were active in it. There is a minute book of the society for the years 1819–26 among the Acton Hall MSS. It was kept by Emma Cunliffe, and describes bow meetings at Acton, Hawarden Castle, Wynnstay, Gwersyllt and Eaton Hall.<sup>58</sup> There is a most attractive print showing the society practising in the grounds of Erthig in 1822.<sup>59</sup> The Cunliffe sisters no doubt knew the Glynnes of Hawarden through the society's activities, and remained friendly with Catherine Glynné after her marriage to W.E. Gladstone in 1839. In 1840 Mr Gladstone rode over to Gresford from Hawarden to visit the Cunliffe sisters and Miss Anne Hayman, an important person in Gresford, who built the house known as Glasfryn, near the church.<sup>60</sup> (She retired to Gresford having been a teacher to Princess Charlotte, the daughter of George IV, and she was also a witness at the trial of Queen Caroline.)<sup>61</sup> Emma Cunliffe wrote a warm letter of congratulation to Mr Gladstone on the birth of a daughter in 1845,<sup>62</sup> and in 1858 Catherine Gladstone went to stay with the Cunliffe sisters for four days to recover from illness.<sup>63</sup> In letters to Mr Gladstone, who remained working at Hawarden, she described how 'cheery and kind' the sisters were, and how bent upon doing her good. She also commented on how pure the air was at 'Pantyochin', as she spelt it.<sup>64</sup>

Soon after the sisters had moved to Pant-yr-Ochain, the tithe map of Gresford, 1844, gave the tenant of the farm and farmhouse as Francis Jones. He died, leaving a widow, Sarah, who continued to farm 180 acres with the aid of her son, Thomas. Another son, William, was a solicitor.<sup>65</sup> By 1861 they had been joined by Henry Bate, her son-in-law, as farmer and maltster.<sup>66</sup>

On the death of the two Cunliffe sisters, Charlotte in 1875 and Emma in 1878, Pant-yr-Ochain reverted to the Acton estate. Henry Bate continued as the tenant of the farm; a bad fire destroyed outbuildings there in 1885.<sup>67</sup> His family remained at the farm up to the First World War. The hall also was let to tenants, firstly a wealthy widow, Florence Ford and her young family, and then, by 1891, Anita Sophia Fletcher, in a more retired way, with only a cook and two maids. The gate lodge at the end of the drive was occupied by the gardener and his family. In 1901 the hall was occupied by William Busfeild, a retired colonel, with his wife and two daughters.<sup>68</sup> The next tenant, by 1909, was Thomas Richard Cholmondeley, a Shropshire gentleman who had married Lady Margaret Herbert, sister of the fourth Earl of Powis. He died in 1922, and she lived on alone at Pant-yr-Ochain for a short time.<sup>69</sup>

The sisters' brother, Sir Robert Cunliffe of Acton Hall (or Acton Park as it became known) died in 1859, to be succeeded by his grandson, Sir Robert Cunliffe, who was the Liberal MP for the Flint boroughs 1872–4, and Denbigh boroughs, 1880–5. Sir Robert, who died in 1905, was the last Cunliffe to live at Acton Park. His son, Sir Foster Cunliffe, was an Oxford don. He was a lecturer in military history, who wrote the official history of the Boer War, and edited *The Times* history of the First World War. He stood unsuccessfully as a Conservative in East Denbighshire in 1906 and 1909. He served as a major in the Rifle Brigade, and was killed in action during the

battle of the Somme in July 1916. As he was unmarried, the estate was left to his brother, Sir Robert N.H. Cunliffe.<sup>70</sup>

After the First World War agriculture was in a depressed state, the gentry had lost much of their power and influence in the countryside, and there was a rush to sell great landed estates, usually to sitting tenants. The Acton Park estate was sold piecemeal in the early 1920s. A new tenant of the farm, John Edward Jones, had arrived in 1919 to succeed an earlier tenant, Charles Davies. In 1921 Mr Jones bought the hall, farm and lands from the estate trustees, and his family have owned them, and lived in the farmhouse, ever since. From about 1924 the hall was let to a Liverpool stockbroker, Ernest Bateson, and he and his family lived in it for thirty years. Then, for five years in the 1950s, it was occupied by Reginald Rider, a dentist who practised in Grosvenor Road, Wrexham. From 1960 there was a succession of tenants, some of whom were less than satisfactory. The hall caught fire in mysterious circumstances in the middle of the night at this period, but fortunately the prompt arrival of the fire brigade prevented serious damage being done. In 1963 the hall became a restaurant, shortly afterwards a hotel, and then a pub which changed hands several times.<sup>71</sup> For a year, 1992–3, it was taken over by Bob Scott, a Wrexham nightclub owner, and much frequented by football players and supporters.<sup>72</sup> In 1994 the present tenants, Pubs Limited (now Brunning & Price) arrived, and began a massive restoration. Since then Pant-yr-Ochain has become deservedly popular as a pub and place to eat out. Its beautiful situation, overlooking the lake, which attracted the unknown Iocyn, the ambitious and influential Almers, and the retiring Cunliffe sisters, now brings thousands of visitors to eat and drink, and to enjoy this historic Gresford house.

### *Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to Mr Albert Jones and Mr Keith Jones, who have provided me with much information on the history of the house; to Mrs Nicolette Cotton, for allowing me to use items from Cunliffe family documents in her possession; to Mr Graham Price of Brunning & Price Ltd, for reading a draft of this article; and to Mr Vernon Hughes and Mr John Parker, who have given me advice on the architecture of Pant-yr-Ochain.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cadw listed building description of Pant-yr-Ochain.

<sup>2</sup> A. N. Palmer, *A History of the Old Parish of Gresford* (London, 1903), 74.

<sup>3</sup> A. N. Palmer, *History of the Thirteen Country Townships of the Old Parish of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 1903), 174.

<sup>4</sup> John Ogilby, *Britannia* (London, 1675), plate 63.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 174–7.

<sup>6</sup> J.Y.W.Lloyd, *The History of the Princes, the Lords Marcher and the Ancient Nobility of Powys Fadog* (London, 1882), III, 218–19.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Jones, *Gresford Village and Church* (Gresford, 1995), 11, 28–9; Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Gresford Village and Church*, 5, 11–12.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd, *Powys Fadog*, III, 216–19; see also the article by A.H.Dodd on the Almer family in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sharp, *Ferries of the River Dee* (Kelsall, 1988), 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters and Papers . . . of Henry VIII*, ed. J.S.Brewer (London, 1870), Vol.4 Pt.1, 869.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Foster Cunliffe, 'Family Records, Collected and Written, by Sir Foster Cunliffe Baronet, with Additions by Sir Robert Henry Cunliffe Bart; Copied, and Illustrated, by his Sister, Emma Cunliffe' (photocopy in Wrexham Museum), 188.

<sup>13</sup> H.M.C. Jones-Mortimer, *High Sheriffs of the County of Denbigh from 1541 to 1970* (1971), 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> E.A. Lewis, *An Inventory of the Early Chancery Proceedings concerning Wales* (Cardiff, 1937), 90.

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Edward A. Fishbourne, *An Architectural History of the Parish Church of Gresford* (Chester, 1924), 28–9; Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, *Inventory of the County of Denbigh* (1914), 62; Colin A. Gresham, *Medieval Stone Carving in North Wales* (Cardiff, 1968), 150–2.
- <sup>16</sup> Flintshire Record Office (FRO), D/PT/30.
- <sup>17</sup> Palmer, *Gresford*, 126.
- <sup>18</sup> For the political background, see A.H. Dodd, ‘North Wales in the Essex Revolt of 1601’, *English Historical Review*, 59 (1944), 348–56.
- <sup>19</sup> Lloyd, *Powys Fadog*, III, 151.
- <sup>20</sup> J.E. Neale, ‘Three Elizabethan elections’, *English Historical Review*, 49 (1931), 209–18.
- <sup>21</sup> Neale, ‘Three Elizabethan elections’, 212. Spelling modernized.
- <sup>22</sup> Neale, 212.
- <sup>23</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 175; *Dictionary of National Biography*, XXI, 225.
- <sup>24</sup> Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’.
- <sup>25</sup> Denbighshire Record Office (DRO), PD/34/1/486, *Gresford Parish Magazine*, May 1873.
- <sup>26</sup> Lloyd, *Powys Fadog*, III, 218–19.
- <sup>27</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 174–7.
- <sup>28</sup> FRO, D/PT/798; Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, 185.
- <sup>29</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, XXXIII, 420.
- <sup>30</sup> Brian Harris, *Chester* (London, 1979), 106–7; Nikolaus Pevsner and Edward Hubbard, *The Buildings of England: Cheshire* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 169–70.
- <sup>31</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 175.
- <sup>32</sup> FRO, D/G/641, D/PT/798, 808.
- <sup>33</sup> FRO, D/PT/808.
- <sup>34</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 176.
- <sup>35</sup> FRO, D/G/3276, John Peck to Sir John Trevor, 18 Jan. 1650/1. I am grateful to Elizabeth Pettitt for this reference. Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, and Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 176–7, are the sources for these years unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>36</sup> 1654 is the date given in ‘Family Records’; Lloyd and Palmer give 1634—probably a copying error.
- <sup>37</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 176.
- <sup>38</sup> Palmer, *Gresford*, pedigree opp p.118.
- <sup>39</sup> Marchwiell parish registers; Palmer is incorrect in giving the date as 1706 (Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, Jeffreys pedigree opp. p. 169).
- <sup>40</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 171.
- <sup>41</sup> DRO, DD/PA/16, Palmer notebooks, Vol. 18 (microfiche in A.N. Palmer Centre, Wrexham).
- <sup>42</sup> 18 Geo. II, c.18.
- <sup>43</sup> Palmer, *Thirteen Country Townships*, 171–2; entry on Acton Park in Alister Williams, *The Encyclopaedia of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 2001), 15–17.
- <sup>44</sup> DRO, QSD/SR/27/18.
- <sup>45</sup> DRO, DD/DM/400/3.
- <sup>46</sup> DRO, QSD/SR/234/10/ 50; QSD/SO/1/6.
- <sup>47</sup> DRO, DD/DM/400/4.
- <sup>48</sup> DRO, Gresford parish registers.
- <sup>49</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade* (London, 1997), 246–7.
- <sup>50</sup> Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, 35.
- <sup>51</sup> Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, 23.
- <sup>52</sup> Alister Williams, *The Encyclopaedia of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 2001), 17.
- <sup>53</sup> Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, 178.
- <sup>54</sup> Cunliffe, ‘Family Records’, 179.
- <sup>55</sup> I owe this suggestion to Mr Vernon Hughes.
- <sup>56</sup> This had been done by 1872, for they are shown on the first edition 25-inch map in that year.
- <sup>57</sup> Census returns for Pant-yr-Ochain in 1851, 1861 and 1871 (microfilm in A.N. Palmer Centre).
- <sup>58</sup> FRO, D/AH/31.
- <sup>59</sup> Reproduced in Gwilym Usher, ‘The Society of Royal British Bowmen (1787)’, these *Transactions*, 4 (1955), 85–90.
- <sup>60</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. M.R.D. Foot & H.C.G. Matthew, III (1974), 2 (entry for 9 Jan. 1840).
- <sup>61</sup> Palmer, *Gresford*, 79.
- <sup>62</sup> St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden, Glynne-Gladstone MSS., general correspondence of WEG.
- <sup>63</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew, V (1978), 276 (3–7 Feb. 1858).
- <sup>64</sup> Glynne-Gladstone MS 615, CG to WEG, 3 Feb, nd, 1858.

- 
- <sup>65</sup> 1851 census return, 1851 (microfilm in A.N. Palmer Centre).
- <sup>66</sup> 1861 census return.
- <sup>67</sup> *Gresford Parish Magazine*, May 1885.
- <sup>68</sup> 1881, 1891 and 1901 census returns.
- <sup>69</sup> *Kelly's Handbook of the Titled, Landed and Official Classes* (1909,1916); *Burke's Peerage*, 1963, 1986 (Powis); information from Mr Arthur Jones.
- <sup>70</sup> Obituary in *Wrexham Advertiser*, 22 July 1916; *Burke's Peerage*; copy will of Sir Foster Cunliffe, 1915 (Wrexham Museum).
- <sup>71</sup> Electoral registers (A.N. Palmer Centre); information from Mr Arthur Jones.
- <sup>72</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 3 Jan. 1992, 12 Feb. 1993 (press-cuttings in A.N. Palmer Centre).