

“The Dillwyn Dynasty”
by
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It is now nearly 50 years since Professor Ieuan Gwynedd Jones first pointed out how little attention had been paid to one of the most important families in 19th century Wales, to what he called that immigrant family, the Dillwyns of Swansea. Admittedly they were commemorated in familiar street names in the town (as it then was) but beyond that they remained rather shadowy figures, hovering vaguely in the memories of some very senior citizens and obviously people of some significance but otherwise largely forgotten. But who were the Dillwyns of our Dillwyn Roads and our Dillwyn Streets?

So, today, I believe for the first time, we shall devote a whole day to the Dillwyns, looking in detail at the remarkable extent and variety of their contribution to the cultural history of South Wales and beyond, and hoping to show how they deserve the attention and even the gratitude of their fellow countrymen and women. It would be impossible to tell the story of every member of that family but I have chosen those who stand out from the crowd and one way of doing that is to speak of those who have found their way into the prestigious Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, the DNB.

To have an entry in the DNB is a sure sign that some historical figure has made his or her mark, however large or small, but for one Welsh family to have five or possibly six entries is unusual to say the least. It may seem a slight exaggeration to speak of the Dillwyns of Swansea as a dynasty but this remarkable family achieved so much in so many fields of creative activity over so long a period, they must have had something special that was passed on from one generation to another in a way that could almost be seen as dynastic succession.

But to understand the Dillwyns and their unusual Anglo Welsh American background we need to glance first at their Quaker inheritance because without touching on that it is a little harder to understand what originally animated their social and political outlook. The family's misty origins in the Welsh border country of Breconshire and Herefordshire, with claims of descent from Sir John De Luen, one of the Norman conquerors, must be treated with some caution but by the 17th century they begin to emerge more clearly into the light of modern history as an established Quaker family, possibly with links to the pretty little Herefordshire village of Dilwyn (with one L) just six miles south of Leominster.

When the great Quaker leader William Penn first founded his eponymous colony of Pennsylvania in 1682 he persuaded many of his persecuted British followers to join him in the newly created City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. Among the earliest arrivals was a young man named William Dillwyn who had emigrated to what was termed the Welsh tract in Pennsylvania from the area around Langorse in Breconshire. In due time Williams' son John became an overseer or governor of one of the first elementary schools in America, the Friends School in Philadelphia, founded in 1689 and now a highly sought after centre of learning, the Penn Charter School. And one of John Dillwyn's appointments to the staff of that school was to have momentous consequences way beyond the Anglo-Welsh connection.

In the 1740s John decided to send his own son, another William Dillwyn, to the Friends School where he was taught by a man still virtually unknown in this country called Anthony Benezet, the son of French Huguenots who had fled persecution originally to London, where they converted to Quakerism, and then to Philadelphia. Benezet is now generally acknowledged in the United States as the founding father of the great campaign for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, and the young William Dillwyn became first his pupil and then his devoted disciple and missionary.

Benezet (whose wife incidentally was the granddaughter of the prominent Welsh-American Quaker physician Dr Griffith Owen who hailed from Dolgellau) Benezet sent Dillwyn across the Atlantic several times to establish close links with the growing movement for abolition in the United Kingdom. They realised that if they could gain support of the British parliament it might be possible to pass legislation that would strip off the cloak of legality that had enabled the slave trade to operate over the previous 200 years. Acting as Benezet's emissary William Dillwyn contacted a wide range of influential figures such as Queen Charlotte and John Wesley and urged on them the moral necessity of ending the brutal traffic in human beings. And as an Anglo-American he was uniquely qualified to co-ordinate the abolitionist movement on both sides of the Atlantic and counter the fierce opposition of the slave owning lobby led by the Duke of Clarence, later William IV.

It was Dillwyn who first convinced his fellow Quakers in London that the one man who could galvanise the abolitionist movement into radical action was the young (non-practising) Anglican clergyman Thomas Clarkson, a tireless organiser and propagandist who, with the parliamentary support of William Wilberforce, eventually brought one of the most powerful public relations campaigns in history to a successful conclusion with the formal abolition of the slave trade in 1807. It gave Dillwyn particular satisfaction as an Anglo-American to see that the acts abolishing the trade were passed almost simultaneously in the US Congress and the British Parliament. But because Clarkson and Wilberforce have rightly received the lion's share of the credit for that stupendous achievement, the crucial role played by William Dillwyn, generously acknowledged by Clarkson himself, has tended to be overlooked. In the recent words of David Brion Davis, the doyen of antislavery historians, it is now time to do justice to the man he calls "this monumental pioneer who made an enormous contribution to the abolitionist cause."

But in between his early commitment to Anthony Benezet and the successful culmination of his transatlantic campaign in 1807, William Dillwyn's story takes us in another very different direction, much closer to us here in Swansea. Back in his home town of Burlington, New Jersey, in 1777 he had found himself in a dilemma. The American colonists had revolted and the Declaration of Independence had been proclaimed a year earlier almost on his doorstep in Philadelphia, just a few miles away across the Delaware river. As a Quaker pacifist he could not obey the rebel call to arms against the British government even though he had always considered himself a patriotic American, but perhaps more importantly he had become engaged to a young woman in London named Sally Weston while on one of his campaigning trips to the United Kingdom in 1774. He solved his dilemma by selling up his business in Burlington and asking Gen. George Washington to grant him a passport to travel safely through the British and American armies so that he could embark from New York, sail to London and marry his beloved Sally Weston. He was never to resume his American citizenship even though he maintained many of the ties with his native country which proved invaluable in his efforts to unite abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic.

After his marriage to Sally Weston in 1777 William set up a prosperous Walthamstow business as a cooper in partnership with his father in law, still vigorously engaged in his antislavery activities but as yet having no particular connection with South Wales other than some Welsh cousins in Pembrokeshire. However, after leaving America for the last time and on his way to London, he had called in to visit some Quaker friends in Swansea and in that short stay had also visited the well known Swansea Pottery and, being shrewd, far sighted entrepreneur, had seen its future possibilities. Twenty years later in 1802 he established his eldest son Lewis Weston Dillwyn as owner of what had by then become the Cambrian Pottery and in doing so also established the Dillwyn dynasty in Swansea for the next 150 years.

Lewis Weston Dillwyn was a very different character from his father and part of the reason lay in their religious affiliation. For the Dillwyn family the memorable year 1807 witnessed not only the abolition of the slave trade but also a fundamental change in their religion because, when Lewis "married out" in that same year, he was automatically disowned by the Society of Friends and from that time onwards the Quaker heritage was only a historical memory. However, this spiritual loss was mitigated by a very considerable material gain in so far as Lewis's bride Mary Adams was the illegitimate daughter and heiress of Col. John Llewellyn of Penllergare, just outside Swansea, who owned large and profitable estates throughout three counties. From that point on the Dillwyns would be among the most influential families in South Wales both socially and politically.

Lewis Weston Dillwyn was a tough, pugnacious industrialist and landowner, dedicated to ensuring a sound inheritance for his son and heir John for whom he acted as trustee of the Penllergare estates until he came of age in 1831. He was also a talented botanist who published several important scientific studies, in addition to producing many fine, artistically pleasing examples of pottery and porcelain from his Cambrian Pottery which cleverly incorporated in the designs some of the botanical specimens in his own collection. He also briefly engaged in national politics when he entered the House of Commons as a Whig MP for the county of Glamorgan at the height of the great Reform crisis of 1832 but was far too attached to his local interests to stay for long in Westminster. His field of activity was Swansea and South Wales and from his home at Sketty Hall he became a major rival to other powerful figures like the Vivians of Singleton and the Talbots of Margam. But though they were far richer in terms of material wealth their cultural impact would turn out to be much less significant than that of the Dillwyns, as we shall see.

What Lewis Weston Dillwyn sought to create at his home, first at Penllergare and later at Sketty Hall was a cultural climate in which all his children, boys and girls, could flourish, where they enjoyed ready access to new ideas and to what we would call today new technology and could pursue their scientific and artistic interests without limitations of time and expense. Not content with providing them with financial security he invested much of his own time and energy in garnering for his family all the latest ideas that currently exercised the minds of some of the most distinguished scientists of the day.

In his regular visits to London as a young man who was already a Fellow of the Royal Society, he had mixed freely with men like Humphry Davy, Michael Faraday, David Brewster and especially his friend William Wollaston who had for many years held the key positions of secretary and president of the Royal Society, and is still regarded today as one of the foremost chemists and physicists of the age. How many other families in Wales at this

time could boast of such invaluable contacts and how many of them could hand on such a wealth of talent to so many generations of the same family? The children of Penllergare were privileged in many more ways than one and it is hardly surprising that they achieved outstanding distinction in several fields of intellectual activity, both in the arts and sciences.

There is no better example of Lewis Weston Dillwyn's importance in the story of the Dillwyns than his hosting of the 1848 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

His friend and colleague at the newly founded Royal Institution of South Wales, William Grove, had used his growing influence with the Association in London to persuade them to hold their annual meeting away from the major centres of population in England and to come to Swansea. At a time when the rapidly expanding railway network had not yet reached Swansea, Grove induced a small army of scientists to undertake the long and arduous journey, first by rail to Bristol and then by steamer to a region they must have regarded as almost unknown territory. When those 800 hardy souls finally arrived in Swansea they were greeted by a host many of them already knew well, and Lewis Weston Dillwyn was proud to show them what Swansea had to offer, including visits to his son John to witness his electrically controlled boats on his lake at Penllergare and his work with underwater cables at the Mumbles which was impressive enough to be reported in the London press. No longer could Swansea be dismissed as a cultural desert hundreds of miles off the beaten track. The Dillwyns, father and son, had put Wales on the scientific map for the first time and there to back them up were several local luminaries like William Grove, William Logan and John Gwyn Jeffreys, all of whom were founder members of the Royal Institution back in 1835 and all of whom went on to become preeminent in their own fields of research.

And in fact we can hardly discuss the Dillwyns without highlighting their long association with the Royal Institution of South Wales. From Lewis Weston Dillwyn's first presidency in 1835 right up to the 20th century there was always a Dillwyn in evidence, either as president, curator or speaker to take the lead in scientific discussion and debate. Nor were they alone in their commitment to the RISW; from its inception it attracted local men (and they were largely men) who were closely involved in reflecting all the latest theories of the day. It would be true to say that during the early and mid Victorian period these dedicated amateurs invested this region of South Wales with a significance out of all proportion to its population and its geographical isolation. Without its Royal Institution the town of Swansea would still have become an industrial phenomenon but would have remained a cultural and scientific backwater. And at the very heart of that Institution was the Dillwyn family, especially Lewis Weston Dillwyn and his sons John and Lewis, all of them with a totally disinterested commitment to the arts and sciences.

It would be quite easy to see the Dillwyns as if they existed in a romantic Welsh bubble in Swansea, oblivious of the ignorance and poverty that surrounded them, blithely unaware of their isolation from the principal centres of learning and happy to indulge their private interests from their position of privilege as "gentleman scientists", rather as we speak loftily of "gentleman farmers". But all the evidence points to their being very much aware of the world beyond their immediate horizons. Because of their high social status they could tap into much of the information that was available to their contemporaries in Oxbridge and London. Remember: this was a period of intellectual ferment: Darwin and his Neath connected ally Alfred Russell Wallace were turning the world down with their theories of natural selection; Tennyson was agonising over religious doubt in his great poem In

Memoriam; Marx was gloomily undermining capitalism at his desk in the British Museum; pure science was advancing steadily, led by the Royal Society, Faraday's Royal Institution and the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

And down in Swansea the Dillwyns and their gentlemen friends were busily working away in that other Royal Institution, making sure that knowledge of scientific advances trickled down even to the furthest reaches of the land. They were committed to spreading enlightenment beyond the exclusive circle to which they belonged. They set up literary and scientific societies that existed within the Museum which the RISW created; they had open days in which hundreds of ordinary people were invited to come along and see what the Museum had to offer and they kept admission prices to a minimum to enable as many people as possible to attend.

It may seem rather patronising today but there was a hunger for education and improvement and they were keen to satisfy it, within the limits of their social preconceptions.

But at the domestic level, Lewis Weston Dillwyn like many other landed gentry recognised the social advantage of uniting with neighbouring influential families and, when his son John came of age in 1831 and took his maternal grandfather's surname of Llewelyn in order to inherit the Penllergare estates, an alliance with one of the immensely rich Talbots of Margam and Penrice seemed like a marriage made in heaven. And John's bride, Emma Thomasina Talbot, was not only eminently eligible in her own right she was also, and more interestingly from our point of view, a first cousin of another even more significant figure, Henry Fox Talbot of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire.

When Fox Talbot announced his epoch making discovery of photography in 1839, John and Emma Llewelyn became ardently keen practitioners of the new art and science of "sun pictures" and were soon turning out work that often equalled that of Emma's famous cousin. Some of John's images have been described as among the most accomplished examples of early photograph and they were often the result of working partnership between John and Emma which placed them on a footing of quality rare in the 1850s. We in the Royal Institution of South Wales were able to prove John's skill when some years ago the distinguished art historian Sir Ernst Gombrich wanted to show the Royal Society in London how difficult it was to illustrate the movement of waves across the sea and we produce a haunting image of a boy fishing in Gower's Brandy Cove at twilight. John's unmarried sister Mary was also capable of producing images at her home in Sketty Hall that have a delicacy and even a subtle sense of humour that sometimes eluded her brother and sister in law.

Nor was photography John Dillwyn Llewelyn's only achievement. Like his father he was deeply committed to scientific research and we have already alluded to his work on electric boats and underwater cables, but he was also a skilled astronomer, building what could well be the first private observatory in Wales, which still stands in the grounds of Penllergare and is now being restored by the Penllergare Trust and other funders. It is altogether too fanciful to speak of Llewelyn's home as almost a research laboratory? I don't believe it is. While many of his peers were spending much of their abundant leisure hunting, shooting and fishing, John Dillwyn Llewelyn was always innovating, learning new skills, so it comes as no surprise to find that his eldest daughter Thereza shared his enthusiasm for scientific discovery and went on to marry a brilliant young Oxford mineralogist named Nevil Story Maskelyne (grandson of the Astronomer Royal) with whom she collaborated on some of the earliest examples of astronomical photography. Again and again we find these fruitful, equal partnerships between

gifted husbands and wives which tend to modify the stereotype of the passive Victorian lady of leisure. In this particular family at least there seems to have been no end to the originality and enterprise of this extraordinary cluster of amateur artists and scientists.

John Dillwyn Llewelyn's brother Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn (the different surnames have always caused identity confusion), being the younger son, could not inherit the profitable family estates but he did inherit his father's Cambrian Pottery, which continued to produce ceramic ware which is much sought after by modern collectors but never yielded substantial profit at the time. Instead young Lewis turned to other more rewarding industries and also to national politics where he was really to make his mark over a very long parliamentary career.

In 1855 he was elected radical Liberal MP for Swansea and held that seat for nearly 40 years, becoming leader of the Welsh radicals in the Commons and a resolute campaigner for the disestablishment of the Welsh Church, for the rights of tenant farmers and late in his career Irish and Welsh home rule. Hard working and conscientious he gained a solid reputation for rugged honesty both in his politics and in his extensive interests, where he moved on from silver refining in London, to massive steel production (with William Siemens) at Landore and finally to spelter production at his Llansamlet factory which became one of the major suppliers of spelter in the burgeoning world market for zinc in the mid-19th century.

And with Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn came another interesting marriage connection which further extended the dynasty into unexplored territory in yet another scientific discipline. In 1838 he married Elizabeth (always known as Bessie) De la Beche, the only legitimate daughter of Henry De la Beche who had achieved great distinction as a pioneering geologist after beginning his career by working closely with the renowned fossil collector Mary Anning of Lyme Regis, the working class heroine who inspired the tongue twister "she sells sea shells on the sea shore" and whose discoveries helped to revolutionise our ideas about the creation of the world.

De la Beche had come to Swansea in 1837 for his work on the ordnance geological survey, had met the family of his old friend Lewis Weston Dillwyn and introduced young Lewis Dillwyn to his daughter Bessie, whose mother was soon to cause a huge scandal in London by publicising her liaison with a dissolute Waterloo veteran named Gen. Henry Wyndham (but that I'm afraid is another story). The fact that Bessie's father was a former slave owner, her future husband was the grandson of William Dillwyn the antislavery campaigner and her mother was living in sin with a wicked aristocrat, all this did nothing to impede the marriage of true minds, so another major alliance was formed when Bessie and Lewis were married in Swansea in 1838. And very soon Bessie was actively engaged in her husband's Cambrian Pottery, putting her artistic skills to good use as a designer of, among other ceramics, the fine Etruscan ware now highly valued by discerning collectors. It was almost as if the traditional Quaker equality between men and women was still in the genes of the Dillwyn family long after the original connection had been broken. It also shows how liberal (with a small L) and broad minded the Dillwyn family were in their ability to overcome scandal and bring up their children in an atmosphere largely free from social prejudice and religious bigotry, where they were not simply confined to the nursery or quickly handed over to a tutor or governess, to be seen and not heard.

If we accept Bessie's father Sir Henry De la Beche as yet another remarkable member of the Dillwyn family it is also worth remembering that among his many other achievements he virtually initiated the geological survey, first laid the foundations for what is now the

Geological Museum in London, and gained a knighthood from Queen Victoria in 1842. But what is rather more important from our point of view is that in 1843, as one of the government commissioners appointed to enquire into the health of towns, he returned to Swansea to highlight the appalling sanitary condition that existed in the town at that time and thus helped to create a demand for radical change. At a practical level Swansea could be said to owe more to De la Beche, who was the first to bring a scientific approach to sanitary reform, than any other member of the Dillwyn family.

Is this proof enough of the outstanding record of the Dillwyn dynasty? But there is more to come with the next generation, with the arrival of Lewis and Bessie Dillwyn's daughter Amy, born in 1845 at Parkwern, a fine house on the outskirts of Swansea, not far from her parents' mansion at Hendrefoilan and later the home of the Dillwyns' rivals, the Vivians of Singleton Abbey.

With an ancestry like hers, Amy could hardly fail to be extraordinary. Having Lewis Weston Dillwyn and Henry De la Beche as her grandfathers and William Dillwyn as her great-grandfather, and being the daughter of a prominent politician, she was born into a highly privileged position. From her youth onwards she had been chosen as the future wife of Llewellyn Thomas, one of the richest young men in South Wales, and after her debut into society moved in some of the most exclusive circles in the land. But when her fiance died of smallpox in 1864 she was left bereft not only of a husband but of a recognised position. When her mother died a few years later her situation became even more unfortunate and she faced a life of spinsterhood, looking after her father's household at Hendrefoilan and dispensing good works to the poor and needy. But she was exceptionally intelligent, thoughtful and radical in her social views and far too independent for many of her potential suitors. She would not remain, as she said, a mere limpet on a rock.

Amy looked critically at upper class society, the society of humbugs as she called it dismissively, and did not like what she saw. One of the few ways she could express her discontent was through the medium of fiction and she wrote in the first instance for two compelling reasons: to relieve the stultifying boredom of having nothing challenging to do and secondly to show how women were not, as Bella Rokesmith says in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, mere dolls in dolls' houses, but intelligent human beings quite the equal of most men and often their superiors.

This was a radical message not every conventional Victorian reader necessarily wished to hear in the 1880s so her six novels never quite rivalled best sellers like those of her contemporaries Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton, but she did establish her reputation as an incisive, original writer with a new view of the exclusive upper class world she knew at firsthand. She could well have continued not only to write novels but also to review them regularly for the influential magazine the *Spectator*, where she was among the first to hail the literary triumph of Stevenson's classic *Treasure Island* in 1883, but then her safe, comfortable world collapsed around her in a series of crushing blows. First her beloved barrister brother Harry died of drink in 1890, then her father Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, still an MP after 40 years in the Commons, died two years later and she lost not only those closest to her but even her home at Hendrefoilan which passed to one of her nephews. To cap it all, she found she had inherited responsibility for her father's factory at Llansamlet which was deeply in debt which had been concealed by a dishonest solicitor, and that as a result hundreds of her workers faced the spectre of unemployment.

With an almost Quaker-like head for business she scorned the cowardly option of selling up and decided to run the works herself with the aid of an experienced manager named John Corfield. She gave up the considerable comfort of a mansion with servants for a life of real austerity and set out to prove that a woman could successfully function in what was essentially a man's world of competitive industry.

After ten years of self sacrifice she finally turned the bankrupt business around and converted a colossal debt of some £100,000 into a profit of £144,00 and immediately became a national celebrity, a cigar-smoking industrialist and one of the most remarkable women of the period, as even several London newspapers acknowledged. Her national soon subsided but she always remained a celebrity in her native Swansea and eventually evolved into the town's Grand Old Lady, widely respected for her rock solid Liberalism and her unflinching but always non-violent feminism.

But as she grew older Amy realised that after her brother Harry's death, leaving no children, the Dillwyn name was in danger of disappearing and she sought to ensure its survival by asking one of her nephews, Rice Nicholl, to change his surname to Dillwyn and in return made him her principal beneficiary.

After Rice Dillwyn's marriage in 1904 into the prominent Gilbertson family of industrialists at Pontardawe, the future of the family name seemed secure but Rice had only one son, Colin, and when he died bravely in the epic army retreat to Dunkirk in May 1940 the Dillwyn name finally disappears from the narrative.

There is one last, tragic footnote to the story of the Dillwyns. Colin Dillwyn had begun a distinguished academic career as a Student and Tutor at Christ Church, Oxford, and had just embarked on a thesis entitled, appropriately enough given his ancestry, "A History of Slavery in the West Indies". When war was declared in 1939 he was among the first to volunteer and his thesis was never completed. Had it been published the family connection with the abolitionist movement might well have continued into the 20th century but fate, in the malign form of Adolf Hitler, decided otherwise. And I would like to think that Colin's American ancestor William Dillwyn, despite his Quaker pacifism, would have been proud of his ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom from tyranny. After 150 years the wheel had come full circle, from the young William Dillwyn sitting at the feet of Anthony Benezet in Philadelphia, to 2nd Lieut. Colin Dillwyn in the Oxford & Bucks Light Infantry giving up his life to defend his comrades in arms on the battlefields of Northern France.

It would be hard to imagine a more poignant final chapter to the story of the Dillwyns. Colin's death meant that the family name had literally reached the end of the line but of course the family links remain with, among others, the Dillwyn-Venables-Llewelyns of Llysdinam in Powys and, closer to home with Mrs Sue Morris who I am very pleased to see is with us here today.

When we look back over the 200 or so years we see a remarkable panorama. It begins in the Welsh borderlands deep into the distant past, and continues with the Quaker emigration to colonial America and profound involvement in one of the greatest political campaigns in history against one of the worst atrocities in human experience, the Atlantic slave trade. We see immigration in reverse with William Dillwyn's decision to come to Britain and set up a prosperous business enterprise while still actively pursuing the the epic struggle which ended with the triumph of abolition in 1807. Then the Welsh connection is renewed with William's

determination to settle his son Lewis Weston Dillwyn into a key position in South Wales society, consolidated by a highly successful marriage which produced two sons destined to leave a permanent mark on the social and political culture of the high-Victorian period. First John Dillwyn Llewelyn in the innovative field of early photograph and secondly Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, keeper of the nonconformist conscience in Parliament for almost 40 years and father of Amy, one of the most outstanding women of the day, a rare combination of industrialist, novelist and feminist. I think you will agree: quite a record for one family.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I hope that my inevitably foreshortened view of the Dillwyns will serve as a useful introduction to the more detailed studies to be presented by my colleagues throughout the rest of the day. I have tried to prepare what I might call the hors-d'oeuvre to what I know will be a very satisfying main course, and then perhaps we shall begin to see why the Dillwyns really do deserve a whole day to themselves.

Thank you.