

Clough Williams-Ellis: Pioneer of the Snowdonia National Park

by Dr Rachel Garden,

My grandfather, Sir Clough Williams-Ellis of Plas Brondanw, who died less than 30 years ago, bought Hafod Lwyfog in the 1930's. He then gave this wonderful mountain ridge to the nation, as part of a tireless campaign of conservation for the beautiful landscapes of Wales. Sir Clough is well-known as an architect, for his village Portmeirion, and his Brondanw garden. Through his own hard work and a generous gift of land, he was also a key figure in establishing the Snowdonia National Park.

The ancient farm Hafod Lwyfog lies beside Llyn Gwynant in the Gwynant valley, reaching up to a high ridge that looks across to Snowdon. Sir Clough always especially loved this valley and in 1936 he was alarmed by the sale notices which advertised the farm as "suitable for lakeside development". He bought the farm to preserve it, as he did a few other properties near his own Plas Brondanw, such as the small mansion Parc in the Croesor valley which had been advertised as suited for mineral development.

Having bought Hafod Lwyfog, Sir Clough then donated the upper part of the farm, around 300 acres of mountain land, as a gift to the nation. This was part of his vigorous, long-running campaign for conservation and the establishment of British National Parks. He writes:

"I had long been envious of those other countries that had National Parks and most gladly served on the original Government Committee that was appointed to consider the establishment of such in England and Wales.

Even before that I had given the National Trust a mountain ridge that looked to Snowdon across the Gwynant Valley with the expressed hope that it might one day form part of a Snowdonian National Park, as it now does. Being as it were the Member for Wales, I had some say as to how the Park boundaries should be drawn, and I was keen they include me, as they happily do. To avoid leaks and premature controversy these boundaries were "top secret" until our report was published and the official announcement made.

However in the meantime I had to meet King George and Queen Elizabeth up at Pen-y-gwryd and explain just what was intended. I told the King he was being given "classified" information, but did not quite tell him to keep it under his Crown. The Queen's comment was characteristically shrewd: "It's fine your preparing this splendid countryside for the people, but are you doing anything about preparing the people to make proper use of it?"
(Architect Errant, p95)

We see in this passage two of Sir Clough's enduring concerns. He fought to preserve and protect land and landscapes and believed the government must take a role in this protection. He argued for "informed and sympathetic State protection" to make natural beauty less dependent on "private piety". Gifts such as his should not be the only protection for important sites.

But in addition Sir Clough shared the Queen's concern that people learn to value and appreciate what was preserved. He strongly believed in the right and the need for people to experience the countryside. Directly after the Second World War, while Chairman of the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales and also Planning Consultant to the Caernarvonshire County Council, he argued against other conservationists in favour of the Butlin's holiday camp at Pwllheli. He argued that his "fellow countrymen and women deserve and ought to be given facilities for well-earned relaxation". He writes:

"We are warned that we shall find ourselves swamped and overrun by undisciplined strangers, but while it is a pity that they are likely to be oblivious of the natural beauty of our countryside and incapable of appreciating and enjoying it - as yet, but that is one of the sad results of our over-urbanization that the more fully civilized are trying to correct." (Ibid p245)

He wrote of similar fears after the end of the Second World War, about the opening up of National Parks for public access:

"These fears of insensitive trampling and despoiling, held by farmers and naturalists and people who wished for wildness inviolate, had this time in fact, a basis in truth. With the overwhelming mass of our teeming population town-bred, barbarously reared in far from splendid cities, having little contact with beauty of any kind, and, therefore, knowing or caring little for it, the introduction [of National Parks] was a hazardous one. For one is unlikely to respond appropriately when presented with the hitherto unknown. Yet it was a risk that had to be taken. We had to put up with the inevitable misunderstandings and gaucheries that marked the first contacts of the Uninitiated with the hitherto unrealized heritage, of the multitudes without solitudes. In order that the very heritage itself be spared.

A wide popularity and appreciation; a democratic goodwill, an alert public opinion that would protect them from injury and maintain their integrity against the Philistine and our possibly more civilized successors, had some how to be assured. The National Parks and their younger brothers the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, have gone a long way to fulfilling this task; they have helped in popularizing the enjoyment of their beauty by making lovely buildings and lovely places generally accessible, without somehow thereby impairing their distinctive characters."

(Around the World in Ninety Years, p 24)

Clough Williams-Ellis was recognized by his country for his fine work, receiving his knighthood following the 1972 New Year's Honours list for services 'to architecture and the environment'. At that time he was the oldest knight ever created.

We should all remember and celebrate this visionary pioneer, a conservationist with deep understanding and appreciation of others. He fought passionately to preserve and protect areas of beauty so that we, succeeding generations, could enjoy them. And he was generous as well as far sighted. His work to establish National Parks, and his gift to the nation of the Hafod Lwyfog mountain ridge for the heart of the Snowdonia National Park, deserve to be remembered with gratitude.