

Plas Newydd and the Ladies of Llangollen

Lady Eleanor Butler was a descendant of the Earl of Ormonde and the youngest daughter of Walter Butler and his wife Eleanor (née Morres). Walter was the de jure 16th Earl, the title having been forfeited by his ancestors for treason. Eleanor had a brother John and two sisters, Frances and Susanna. Eleanor was considered an over-educated bookworm by her family and was sent from the family home at Kilkenny Castle to be educated in a convent in Cambrai France.



Thought to be a portrait of a young Eleanor Butler.



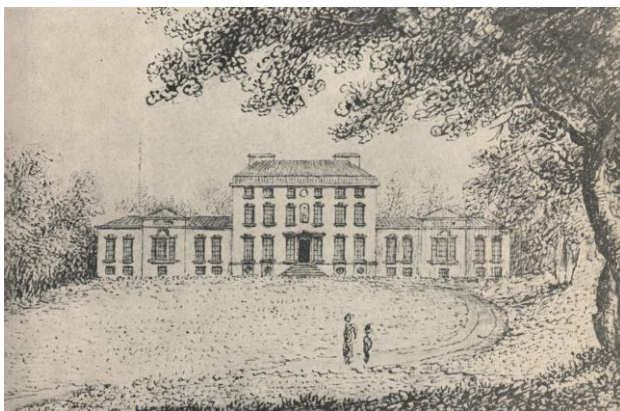
Sarah Ponsonby aged about twenty one.

Sarah Ponsonby was born at Ashgrove, Co. Kilkenny, daughter of Chambre Brabazon Ponsonby and his second wife Louisa (Lyons). Sarah had an elder sister Frances, from Chambre's first marriage to Elizabeth Clarke. From her father's third marriage to Mary Barker Sarah gained another sister Mary and a brother Chambre Brabazon. Her father died before her brother was born and her stepmother re-married. Sarah's family wanted to try and marry her into money and to this end Sarah was sent to live with her elderly cousin Lady Betty Fownes and her husband Sir William, at Woodstock, Inistogue, to be introduced into fashionable Dublin society.

Eleanor and Sarah met when Sarah attended a boarding school near Kilkenny whilst Eleanor was still living in Kilkenny Castle. Both Eleanor and Sarah were under pressure to marry. Sarah was troubled by the unwelcome attentions of her guardian Sir William Fownes. In March 1778 the Ladies made plans to runaway together, disguised in men's clothing. However, they were discovered at Waterford and were taken back to their homes. They were more successful in their second attempt in May. They sailed from Ireland to Milford Haven and toured Pembrokeshire, and then continued on to Llangollen.



Kilkenny Castle.



Woodstock.



Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby.

By 1788 they had converted the dairy into a brewing kitchen at the front, and a library with a bay with gothic windows, to the rear. On 2nd September in 1791 John Edwards,



Plas Newydd in 1792.

The Ladies were on close terms with most of the local gentry, and their extensive correspondence led to visits from many of the influential and prominent writers, poets and statesmen of the day.

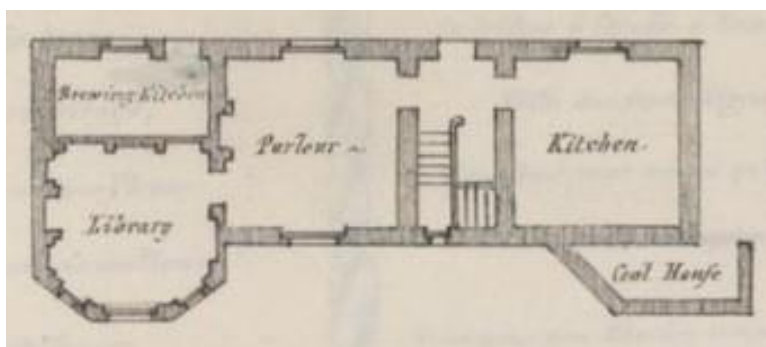
This was made easier after the A5 had been completed, in around 1817. In 1819 the Ladies purchased the property, although it was not until 1825 that they completed the payments. Lady Eleanor Butler died on 2nd June 1829, and Sarah Ponsonby on 8th December 1831. They were buried with their maid, Mary Carryll in St Collen's Churchyard.

Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, arrived from Ireland in 1778 and spent the winter of 1778-9 at Blaen Bache Farm, and then lodged in Chapel Street. They then took a tenancy at Pen-y-maes, the property of Edward Edwards of Pentrip, in 1780. Their occupation was to last around half a century.



Pen y Maes, as it looked when the Ladies moved in.

Edward's son, "granted a lease for 99 years to Lady E. Butler, and Miss Ponsonby, on that messuage or newly-erected dwelling house (Plas Newydd) and croft, which was converted into a garden, at the annual rent of £23. In 1792, a new room and cellar were added to the back of the cottage.



A plan of Plas Newydd in 1792.

On 28th June 1832 the property was sold, the two buyers being two ladies who had long lived in Llangollen. Amelia Lolly, had been born Liverpool 1783, the daughter of Walter Lolly a distiller, and Charlotte Andrew who was born in Harpurhay, Manchester in 1791, the daughter of Robert Andrew, a dyer.

They were referred to by Eleanor Butler as the “Lollies and Trollies”, they had long tried to emulate the life style of the Ladies, but with little success. Having bought the house for £1,400 they proceeded to embellish it, although one visitor of the time commented that ‘the whole place had a vulgar and commonplace appearance’.

Charlotte died in 1854 followed by Amelia in 1861, and the estate passed to Mrs Robina Couran of Plumpton, Charlotte’s niece. The property was sold by auction again in 1876, when it was purchased by Richard Lloyd Williams of Denbigh, although later that same year ownership was transferred by private sale to General Yorke of Erddig.



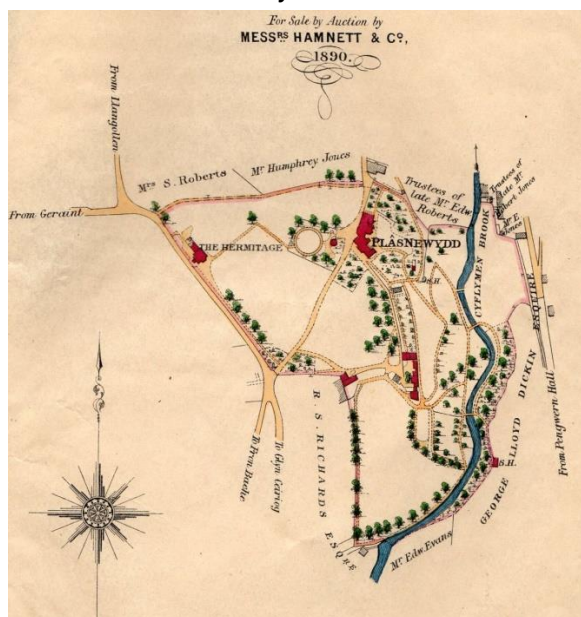
Plas Newydd in 1840.



Plas Newydd in 1890 showing the added west wing.

It was he who made many additions and modifications, including the black timbering and the building of the west wing.

In 1890 it was acquired by George Hunter Robertson and his younger brother Helenus Robert, who were Liverpool cotton brokers. They were responsible for the creation of the formal gardens and the addition of the largely prefabricated east wing.

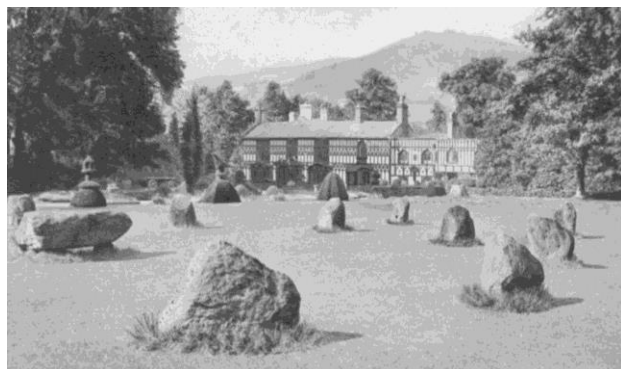


Map from the 1890 Sales Catalogue.



The 1908 National Eisteddfod Gorsedd.

By 1901, George Robertson and his family had moved out of Plas Newydd to Sandy Lane in Chester, although they seem to have continued to own Plas Newydd, with members of the family living there for some of the time. In the 1901 census, the house was being lived in by Clara Bailey and Margaret Lloyd, respectively the caretaker and housemaid. In July 1910, the Robertsons sold the house to Mrs G.M. Wilson of Lincoln, although, in the 1911 census, it was occupied just by housemaids Sarah Jane Edwards and Annie MacMillan. George Henry Robertson was recorded as living in Hoole in Cheshire, when he died in February of 1912, aged 75.



The Gorsedd stones.

After the end of the First World War, Llangollen Council were starting to consider the possibility of acquiring Plas Newydd for the Town, especially “in view of the fact that the demolition of the residence was seriously being considered”. The plan was to establish a Museum of North Wales there, with Plas Newydd as the centre.



The house passed through several hands before being acquired by the town council in March 1933 for £3,320, and opened to the public on 25th May that year.

The Bards' Memorial was constructed in 1958, in memory of three famous Llangollen bards (poets), Jonathan Hughes, Taliesin o Eifion and Gwilym Ceiriog.

The opening ceremony of the Bards' memorial in 1958.



The demolition in progress in 1963.

In 1963, the Urban District Council took the decision to take the appearance of Plas Newydd back to that at the time of the Ladies. The east and west wings were demolished, restoring the house to its original form, although the later black and white timbering on the front and sides was kept.

A 'pre-demolition party' was held in the empty west wing,

allowing the people of Llangollen and further afield the opportunity to say goodbye to the parts of the building that were due to be demolished. In June 1963, Jackson-Stops and Staff of, Chester, held a pre-demolition auction on the premises. The sale was very well attended, with people eager to purchase a memento of the house. However, the prices realised were unexpectedly low, with many items going for £1 or less.

Today, Denbighshire County Council continues to open Plas Newydd to the public, as a Museum telling the story of the Ladies of Llangollen.



Plas Newydd today.