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JOHN DAVENPORT AND THE DESIGN OF CLYTHA CASTLE

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1787 began with a tragedy for William Jones of Clytha House, Monmouthshire. On January 14, Elizabeth, his beloved wife of 20 years, died aged 58. For William, the fourth son of John Jones of Llanarth Court, the match had been a spectacular one. Her epitaph in Llanarth Church tells us that she was the “last surviving Issue and Heir” of the fabulously wealthy Sir William Morgan of Tredegar Park, whilst her maternal grandfather was the second Duke of Devonshire.

The devastated widower decided to console himself by creating a personal Elysium on his Welsh estate. At the end of 1788 he paid his tenant John Smith £100, “for giving up Clytha House at midsummer last”¹ and moved there from his London home in Hanover Square. In January 1790 building work began on Clytha Castle — a Gothic eyecatcher and memorial to Elizabeth. A tablet on the building states that it “was undertaken for the purpose of relieving a mind sincerely afflicted by the loss of a most excellent wife”.

The design of the Castle has been attributed to John Nash on the basis of a payment of £10 to “J. Nash for his plan”.² Richard Haslam has also suggested that a likely source for the design was an architect based in Bristol or Bath.³ However, a further study of William Jones’s account book from 1771 to 1792, clarifies the question of the designer as it reveals that the payment of £10 probably does not relate to the Castle as it stands. It now seems much more likely that John Davenport, a landscape gardener and architect of Burlton Grove, near Wem in Shropshire, was responsible for the design, with perhaps some help from his client.⁴



Fig. 1. John Davenport, Clytha Castle, Monmouthshire (The Landmark Trust).

In the account book the payment to “J. Nash” is not in the lengthy and very detailed section headed “Castle”. It appears at the bottom of a list of servants’ bills under “Contingents” and it is dated October 28, 1790. The first payments for building work at the Castle were made at the beginning of January that year, and by October the Castle was well advanced.

Indeed, it appears that John Nash’s first contact with the philosophy of the Picturesque, so effectively and confidently applied at Clytha Castle in 1790, did not come until later. For Uvedale Price, Nash built a triangular castellated house near Aberystwyth, which has been variously dated between 1792 and 1797. In a letter of March 18, 1798 to George Beaumont, Price recalls a conversation with his architect. He writes that John Nash “was exceedingly struck” with the reasons for the Picturesque siting of the house, which he said “he had never thought of before in the most distant degree”.⁵ Therefore it seems likely that the Nash plan for William Jones may relate to another, possibly unexecuted, project at Clytha.

William Jones began the task of remodelling his estate by having it surveyed by John Aram in the spring of 1789. On November 14 of that year he paid “John Davenport, himself; foreman, for journeys, plans complete, plans for hot houses etc. £98.17s.6d”.⁶ The Castle was the most important feature in the new pleasure grounds. It was situated across the road from the house on a steep hill which meant that it served two purposes: first as an eyecatcher from the house below and secondly as a place from which to admire the spectacular local views. Beginning on January 7, 1790 under the heading “Castle” there are 14 pages of the most detailed payments in William Jones’s account book. During the first year of its construction, he spent £1,214 5s lld, on the Castle. Of this, £91 15s was paid in five instalments to John Davenport, Esquire.

In his article on Daylesford in *The Georgian Group Report and Journal* 1989, Andrew Ginger stated that Davenport’s “hitherto anonymous contribution to late eighteenth-century landscape gardening awaits further exploration”.⁷ Since then he has emerged from obscurity due to the investigations of Howard Colvin and Nicholas Kingsley; and Susan Morris who discovered that the Orangery at Daylesford is Davenport’s design rather than being the work of S.P.Cockerell.⁸

A brief comparison of the buildings at Clytha and Daylesford may be useful in showing the possibility of Jones’s personal involvement in the design of his folly. The Daylesford Orangery was completed in the Spring of 1790, just at the time that work was getting underway at Clytha Castle.

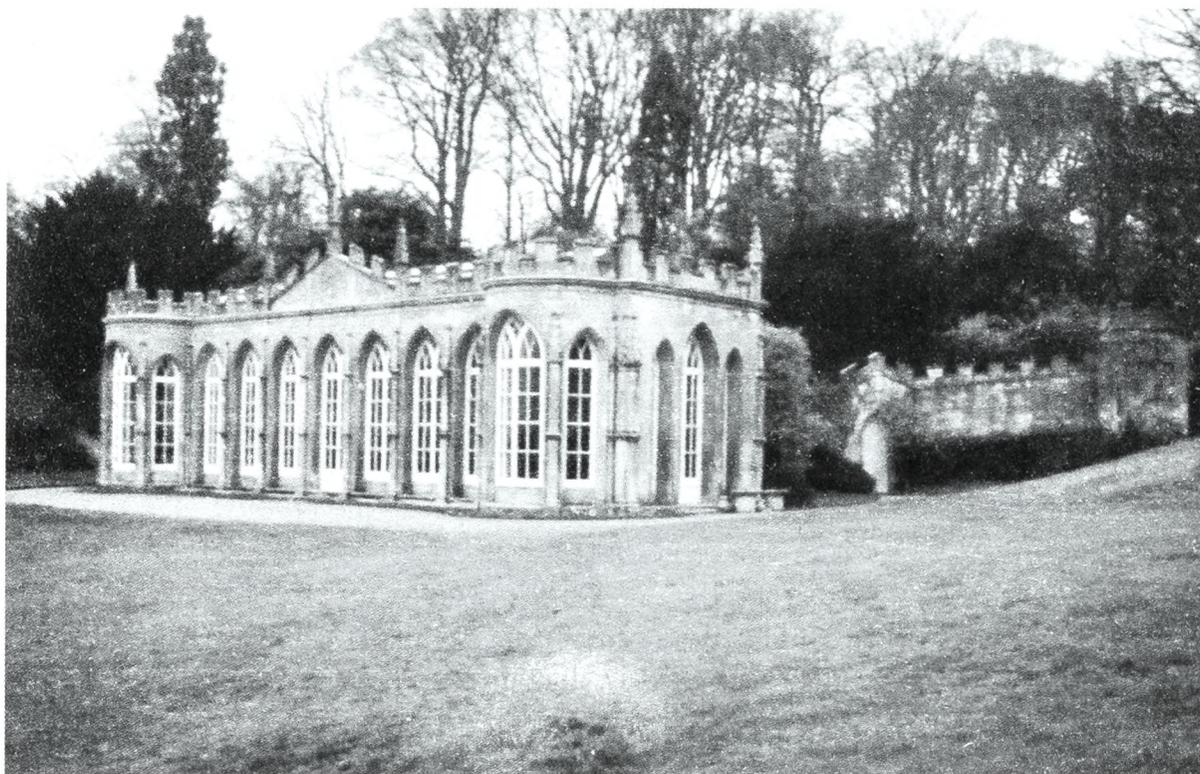


Fig. 2. John Davenport, the Orangery at Daylesford, Oxfordshire (Roger White).

Like the Castle, the Orangery is a right-angled composition with one arm sweeping backwards and terminating in a battlemented round tower. On this there is a blind cross-loop, also seen on the Castle walls. The Orangery is a neat, one-storied building set close to Cockerell's Classical house but it lacks the vivacity of its Welsh counterpart. Davenport's commission at Clytha, however, was for a much larger building, rather different in purpose.

It was conceived by an emotional widower and its flamboyance compared to the Daylesford building suggests that William Jones himself had some part in the design. As Roger White has shown, "the curtain wall . . . sweeps up to an elegant if unarchaeological peak, . . . and the building is made to seem picturesquely asymmetrical by the addition of a slim circular stair turret to the square angle tower".⁹ The design was handled with an imagination and confidence which may well point to the involvement of Jones himself. That he took a particularly close interest in its construction is clear from his account book: every single payment concerning the building is carefully noted in his own hand.

Work seems to have gone smoothly and the Castle progressed quickly. In 1791 there are payments to Wedgwood and Co. for china; Mr Mayhew & Ince were paid £1,000 for furniture; and fabrics of all kinds were purchased. Although there is a mildly disturbing entry on April 7, 1792 for "Thos Rachel's bill for setting up ye Terrets which were blown down by the Wind",¹⁰ it was for only 3s 9d and unlike Warren Hastings, Jones does not appear to have fallen out with Davenport. He was still at Clytha in October 1793 as he was paid "for going to London about the furniture".

This last item does not occur in the Gwent Record Office account book which ends at the close of 1792. It appears in a note of later payments made by a family friend earlier this century¹¹ and must come from William Jones's succeeding ledger beginning in 1793. It would be welcome to know the whereabouts of this book. Apart from shedding light on the conclusion of the Castle's construction, it might record the building of the Gothic gateway to Clytha House, which the Rev. Richard Warner saw being erected in 1797,¹² and which Sir Richard Colt Hoare (who saw it a year later) noted as being "from a design by Mr. Nash the architect".¹³

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would particularly like to thank Howard Colvin for information about John Davenport, a fuller account of whom will be found in the forthcoming new edition of his *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*.

NOTES

1. William Jones, *Clytha Estate Account Book Ledger 1771-92*, Gwent County Record Office, D43.2114(M.413).
2. Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, London, 1978, 582.
3. See Richard Haslam, "Clytha Park, Gwent", *Country Life*, December 8, 1977.
4. John Davenport practised chiefly as a garden architect in Wales, Gloucestershire and the North West of England in the second half of the 18th century. He died in 1795. At the same time as working at Clytha, he was employed by Sir Walter Blount at Mawley Hall, Shropshire, and by Lord Hawke at Scarthingwell Hall, Yorkshire. Both clients were Roman Catholics and it may have been in this connection that Davenport was suggested to William Jones, himself a Catholic.
5. John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect*, London, 1980, 21. The original letter is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.
6. William Jones, *op.cit.*
7. Andrew Ginger, "Daylesford House and Warren Hastings", *The Georgian Group Report and Journal* 1989, 98.
8. *Ibid.*, 97.
9. Roger White, *Georgian Arcadia: Architecture for the Park and Garden*, 1987, 29-30, 42.
10. William Jones, *op.cit.*
11. This list is held in the Clytha Castle archive at The Landmark Trust.
12. R. Warner, *A Walk through Wales in August 1797*, 1798, 26.
13. M.W. Thompson (ed.), *The Journeys of Sir Richard Colt Hoare*, Gloucester, 1983, 96.

Clytha Castle belongs to The Landmark Trust and is available for holidays. If you would like to stay there, please contact: The Landmark Trust, Shottesbrooke, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 3SW. (0628) 825925.