

'Opening the Vaults': Researching Welsh families and their archives, c.1500-1850

- Gloddaith Hall (St. David's College), nr. Llandudno -  
23rd August, 2011

Hosted at one of the most spectacular gentry houses surviving from early-modern Wales, this one-day symposium held under the auspices of the Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (IMEMS) provided the forum for a broad range of 'case study' presentations relating to studies of early-modern Welsh families and their archives. The event featured presenters from the fields of History, Literature, Creative Writing and Information Studies in addition to the keynote speaker Miles Wynn Cato, an independent art dealer who specialises in the portraiture of the Welsh gentry and art works relating to Welsh country houses and estates. Speakers considered the issue of what constitutes a Welsh family archive and suggested ways of approaching and utilising the divergent items within these collections. The event was 'open to all' and a large audience was in attendance, comprising of academics, members of local history societies and other interested members of the public.

Lord Mostyn, whose ancestors had resided at the venue for centuries, appropriately commenced the proceedings with a few opening remarks before Dr. Gwen Saunders Jones (Bangor University) delivered the first paper. This focused on the life and works of the Welsh-language poet Alis ferch Gruffudd (fl.1540-70), a young women with a unique and independent poetical persona. The wider contexts of Alis's poetry were considered including family influences and religious and cultural developments. Shaun Evans, (Aberystwyth University), delivered a presentation which orientated around the heraldic display surviving within the architecture of Gloddaith hall from the sixteenth century. One of the overriding points highlighted by the speaker was that images and items as well as words played a major part in the self-expressions of the gentry and thus, should be considered as important features of family archives. This focus on the virulence of visual and material culture was continued by Miles Wynn Cato in his copiously illustrated presentation entitled 'Welsh paintings as historical evidence'. Similarly, in her talk based on the estate papers of Aberglasney and its owner Thomas Philipps, Dr. Lowri Rees (Bangor University) considered issues of 'conspicuous consumption' and its relations to social mobility in eighteenth-century Wales.

Dr. Julie Mathias from the Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University, delivered an extremely useful paper relating to the strengths and pitfalls of using finding aids for family and estate archives using the Cefnbryntalch/Buckley Jones Collection - housed in the National Library of Wales - as her example. Dr Rhys Morgan (Cardiff University) was unable to attend the event in person but sent a paper centring on the pedigree roll of the regicide Colonel John Jones of Maesygarneid (c.1597-1660). This pedigree roll, dated January 1650, was analysed to challenge the traditional view of Jones as a republican zealot, strongly opposed to the monarchy and stripped of any Welsh identity.

The final panel considered the experiences of women controlled, affected and represented by Welshmen during the long eighteenth century. Marian Gwyn (Bangor University) gave a fascinating and moving paper focusing on the Penrhyn archive and the accounts of the experiences of female slaves on the West Indian sugar plantations owned by this Welsh estate. Elin Ifan, an independent scholar, considered the complementary roles which archive material and 'active imagination' take in creative writing in a talk interspersed with extracts from a story based on her own eighteenth-century ancestors. Mary Chadwick (Aberystwyth University) delivered the final paper of the day in which she considered three poems from the archive of the Griffiths of Garn in the contexts of the representations of women found in the collection and the challenges of working with anonymously authored manuscript poems.

The Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies kindly funded the event. We are also grateful to St. David's College and Mostyn Estates for allowing us to use Gloddaith hall at the venue at no cost. The Society of Renaissance Studies generously funded the postgraduate bursaries offered at this event.

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