

Colwyn Bay CIVIC SOCIETY

SEPTEMBER 2006



William Bowen's uncle, William Morris Evans on left of doorway c1915.



On the right: Rhys P. Bowen & Mary Winifred (nee Evans) Bowen: the parents of William John Bowen: September 1934.

William John Bowen was the elder brother (by fourteen years) of Stuart Powell Bowen who designed the Seventy Degrees Hotel at Penmaenhead (NB Journal March 2003). William John founded the Architectural firm in Colwyn Bay which Stuart then took over after his brother's death and which is now known as Bowen, Dann, Knox.

William John Bowen was a gifted architect a fact which is well illustrated by his work in Colwyn Bay. He was born on 20th December, 1907 to Rhys Powell and Mary Ellen Evans of Cwm Penmachno. It is delightful to discover that in a house he designed on Allanson Road, Rhos-on-Sea called White Cottage (now number 10) today lives Llinos and Paul Garstang. Llinos is the great-granddaughter of David Evans who was Mr. Bowen's uncle (he was Mary Ellen Evans' brother). Another of William Bowen's uncles on his mother's side was William Morris Evans who

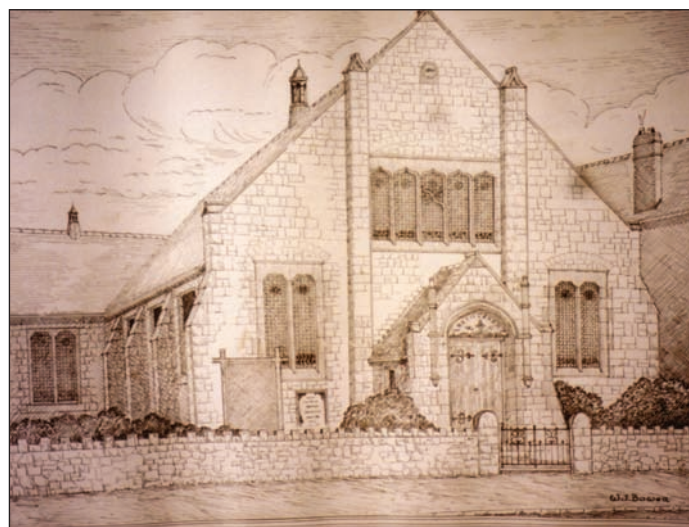
owned and ran the large general stores called Bryn Gwynt on the corner of Abergele and Cefn Roads, Old Colwyn. He bought the business in 1906 at the rear of which was a large bakery. During the 1st World War soldiers were billeted on the family, but unfortunately Mr. Evans' wife ran away with one of them and was never ever seen again. Mr. Evans then

proceeded to run the business alone and bring up their three daughters alone. The 3 girls were called Annie, Madge and Betty and in 1921 Betty became the Colwyn Bay May Queen and is still alive today living in Hemel Hempstead.

So William John Bowen was born into a well known and well respected local family. Indeed in 1904 when his parents,

Rhys and Mary were married his grandfather's occupation was given on the marriage certificate as 'Car Proprietor'; a fact which in those days marked him out as a very important man in the community.

Sadly Mr. William John Bowen, for most of his life, suffered from asthma, but that did not stop him, as was the custom and ignorance of the times, from smoking lots of cigarettes each day. Indeed his son Lloyd (also destined to be an architect) seems to recall walking with his mother from Colwyn Bay to the West End each day to buy the daily packet of ciggies for his



Mr. Bowen's drawing of Bethlehem Chapel



1st cousin to W. J. Bowen. Last queen to be crowned on Pier Pavillion before it burnt down for the first time

the architects in Llandudno. J. Arfon Jones. He then went on to the Colwyn Bay firm of Colwyn Foulkes where Sydney Colwyn Foulkes took him under his wing and where he remained for four years working on such projects as the Science laboratories at Rydal School and the Plaza Cinema in Rhyl. The laboratories are still very much in use today but the cinema has been pulled down. This was some years before Frank Lloyd Wright came to visit Mr. Foulkes' studio and garden, but Mr. Foulkes took to wearing the same sort of hat as Frank Lloyd Wright. (Mr. Foulkes can be seen wearing the head gear in "Architect Errant" and Mr. Lloyd Wright can be seen in the hat in the March 2001 edition of this Journal). The two men had a high regard for one another and the staff at the Colwyn Foulkes studio smiled at the homage paid one to the other in their choice of hat.

In 1933 Mr Bowen set up his own business in the back bedroom of his parents home at Myrddin, Woodhill Road.

£397. The schoolroom still stands but sadly not for many more years. In 2007 the congregation from Bethlehem are being turfed out of the Chapel on Lawson Road and are joining the congregation of Hermon Chapel in Rhos-on-Sea in a newly built Chapel which will stand on Llanerch Road East. Rhos-on-Sea. (NB February 2006 journal) In the same year that he married, William understandably moved his place of work from the bedroom at his parent's house to Somerset House on Princess Drive, and it is there that all his major commissions were executed.

Just before the 2nd World War Mr. Bowen designed the three houses, numbers 10, 12 and 14 Allanson Road, Rhos-on-Sea. They are named, White Cottage, Rhondda and Cartre; the words White Cottage (Llinos's home) and Cartre are still inscribed on the stone gate pillars, but the name Rhondda seems to have been lost somewhere in the past sixty years. White Cottage and Cartre were built first (c1935) and then Rhondda was built on the land between them in 1938.

You can tell from their design that they are the product of one man's imagination but they are never the less different from one another. They are black and white and partially gabled with half timbering on the outside; they are of their times, Tudorish in appearance with an Arts and Crafts overtone. Indeed the interiors of these homes still retain their Arts and Crafts feel of good workmanship and detailed design.

Dr. Parry Evans (a partner with Dr. Bennett) used to live in number 14 (Cartre) during the war years. His father was born at Rhos Fynnach and is memorialised and buried at Llandrillo-yn-Rhos Parish Church. The grave lies to the left of the Lych Gate. The inscription on the grave also recalls the deaths of R. Evans' two sisters, Mary and Elizabeth who died aged 22 months and 3 weeks respectively. At the bottom of the stone are inscribed the words: "Youth is of the spirit".



Number 6 (left) and 4 (right) Ael-y-Bryn Road. No 6 was his own. No 4 built for Ken Neill

father! He died on the 12th April, 1950, aged 42 years. At the time of his death he was living in a house that he had designed himself, Bryn, number 6 Ael-y-Bryn Road, Colwyn Bay. His widow, Mary Winifred, continued to live in the house for another 34 years, until her death on 22nd September, 1984, aged 78 years.

Their bodies lie together under a welsh slate headstone in Llandrillo-yn-Rhos Parish Church-yard.

The house, Bryn is sometimes mistaken for one of Mr. Herbert Luck North's houses (NB Journal Oct. 1996). It is however very much the creation of William John Bowen and bears all the hallmarks of his unerring eye for a contemporary, individualistic design.

Mr. Bowen went to Colwyn Bay Council School and then went as an apprentice to

A year later he was elected onto the register of ARCUK and on 13th January 1935 at Bethlehem Chapel, Lawson Road, he married his wife Mary Winifred Hughes.

There was a long standing association with Bethlehem Chapel for William's father was a highly respected member of the Chapel indeed in 1939 he was the chairman of the Bethlehem Eisteddfod and 4 years later his funeral service was held there on 29th July 1942. Two years before his marriage William had designed the new schoolroom at the Chapel for the total contract sum of



Cartre, Allanson Road

In the 1960's Mr. John Leven Davies (son of John Ivor Davies of Warwick House, Colwyn Bay: NB October 2000 Journal 'Ghosts of the past'), lived at Rhondda (number 12). John's great uncle was the original owner of this house and named it Rhondda because his wife Minnie had been born there in South Wales. This great uncle of John's was called Reuben Leven and was a Jewish man who had come to this country from Latvia. He arrived with two friends, Mr Policoaff (who opened a food store in Bangor and retained his Jewish faith, and Mr.

initiated into Sincerity Lodge here in Colwyn Bay by their father on the same evening in 1952. Their father happened to be the Worshipful Master of the Lodge at the time. After the ceremony everyone went to the Pwllcrochan Hotel for a meal. The following year the writer of this article found himself a pupil boarder at the same building by which time it had become Rydal Preparatory School. Frederick went on to be one of the founders and worshipful master of Derwen Masonic Lodge and William went on to be the Master of Sincerity Masonic

the corner of Allanson and Crossley Roads (No. 8 Crossley Road). The contrast in their styles can readily be discerned. Curiously enough, after leaving school, the present owner of Number 8, Mr Travis, like William John Bowen before him, went to see Sydney Colwyn Foulkes with a view to a career as an architect and quantity surveyor. Mr. Colwyn Foulkes asked the young Geoff Travis whether he enjoyed sport; Geoff confirmed that he was an enthusiastic footballer and cricketer and would always play these games with his friends over the weekend.



Rhondda, Allanson Road



White Cottage, Allanson Road



The Allanson Road houses today



The White Cottage today

Prendaville who converted to the Catholic faith. Reuben gave up his faith in order to marry his Church of England wife. When Reuben died and his burial took place in Llandrillo-yn-Rhos Parish Church, his friend Mr. Prendaville came to the burial but stayed outside the walls of the Church-yard because he was a Catholic and he was wary of entering a Church of England sanctuary. The family can still recall Minnie's disgust at this ridiculous situation.

John Leven Davies has two brothers, Frederick Leven Davies and William Leven Davies and all three of them were

Lodge, all here in Colwyn Bay.

Messrs Ashworth Bros. Ltd. of Rhos-on-Sea built The White House and Cartre and Messrs Lloyd Williams and son built Reuben Leven's home. All three houses had been built on the instructions of J. H. Morgan OBE of Cliffe House, Rhos-on-Sea. Cliffe House is now a vegetarian old folks home on the corner of Whitehall Road and Everard Road.

Thirty years later, Mr. Bowen's young brother Stewart Powell Bowen, was to design the house which now stands three houses further up the road than Cartre on

Mr Colwyn Foulkes replied, "all that will cease; all your old leisure time will in the future be occupied by study and your weekends will be taken up by studying the differences in architectural styles found in the Colwyn Bay area". Geoff left Mr. Colwyn Foulkes' office and never returned!

Mr. Thomas Cliffe (the stamp man) lived at Wayside Lodge, Whitehall Road, Rhos-on-Sea; a residence (now number 20) which his daughter describes as looking like a doll's house. It is square, white and undistinguished and has now been split into two flats. In 1937, between Wayside



18 Whitehall Road, Llys Elen



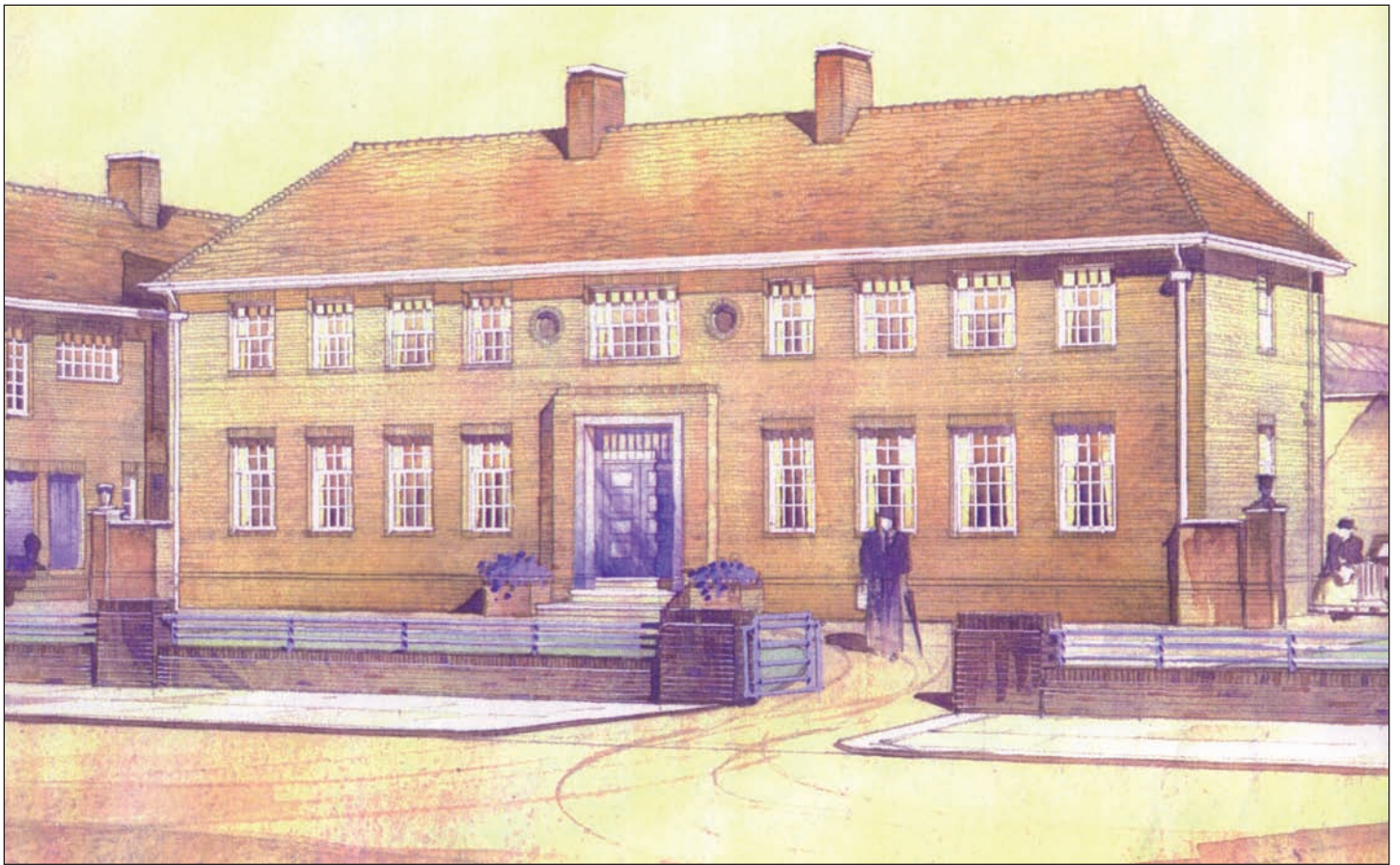
Philatic factory at Marsh Road, Rhyll - the company coach used to ferry workers each weekend between Colwyn Bay and Rhyll



Thomas Cliffe's delivery van

and what is now Highcroft Nursing Home on the corner of Francis Avenue, there was a vacant plot of land owned by Mr. E. H. Thorpe who was living at Kinsella, 73 Rhos Road. Mr. Thorpe employed William John Bowen as architect and George Essex as builder to construct two houses on the field. The contract sum on the first house in 1936 was £1,333 and on the second house, the following year, £1,448; so inflation is nothing new. Mr. Bowen obviously rated Mr. Essex's work very highly because it was he whom he used to build his own home on Ael-y-Bryn Road. Local people may remember Nancy Essex (George's estranged wife) who after the war was a well known and respected taxi driver who worked all the hours God gave her and ran the elderly folk of Rhos-on-Sea all over the place for many years. The two Whitehall Road houses are now numbered 16 and 18. Number 18 is called Llys Elen (because the owner used to be the proprietor of Elen's Castle Hotel in Dolwyddelan). Also in this house used to live the Fire Chief Officer for Colwyn Bay. Both houses, from the outside, are almost identical. The left hand ground floor window on Llys Elen is cut square to hold a black and white fascia and boarded first floor wall, supported on pediments either side of the ground floor window. This architectural feature was not used on the home next door, but Mr. Bowen had already used the idea on Cartre round the corner in Allanson Road. The distinctive Arts and Crafts brick surround to the front door is also replicated on both houses. Frank Lloyd Wright wrote that his ideal home should allow "breadth and prospect" in the public sphere and "privacy for each individual homeowner." William John Bowen had, like Frank Lloyd Wright, a deep interest in housing people economically but stylishly and these two houses show this concern admirably.

Thomas Cliffe (from Wayside Lodge, Whitehall Road) was a stamp dealer in Colwyn Bay before the last war, employing many young people. He had started his business in 1920 and by the 1930's his name was associated with Colwyn Bay by



Architectural drawing for the stamp factory

the majority of the five million stamp collectors in Great Britain. His office was on Princess Drive opposite the Post Office and next door but one to Mr. Bowen's office. This building is now owned by Messrs Glyn Owen & Co., the solicitors. Mr. Cliffe also rented number 44 Princess Drive, next door to Pye's Coach office on what is now the car park opposite the Baptist Church.

In 1937, as the Italian Army advanced through Abassynia (now Ethiopia) on towards the capital Addis Ababa, Mr Cliffe instructed a Greek messenger to travel to the capital with a draft money order of £15,000.00 to secure all the unused Abbassyian stamps. The Greek emissary, after speaking, amongst others, to Haile Salassi, returned to Colwyn Bay having successfully secured over 400 million stamps at least 5 million of which were rare unissued Abassyian Red Cross stamps.

From the Princess Drive Office stamps were packed and sold through all sorts of diverse outlets, one of them being Woolworths.

Around this time Mr.

Cliffe clinched a deal with the Carreras Company to supply 10,000 packets of stamps each day to place in their Turf Cigarette packets. Mr. Cliffe took these each day to the railway station after which each evening in London, they were put in with the cigarettes. This labour went on six days a week for a year until the government stopped the company from using the stamps in this manner because they argued it was a form of gambling because someone had claimed on finding a particular stamp in one of the packets

that he was entitled to a windfall of 2/-! In those days people from allover the country kept their envelopes, steamed off the stamps and passed them on to Mr. Cliffe for a small amount of money. He was so well known that he was sent letters from allover the world. Someone wrote to him from Budapest addressing the envelope simply, 'Mr. Cliffe, Colwyn Bay, England', and he received it two days after it had been sent!

The business was thriving to such an extent the Mr. Cliffe decided to employ



Mr. Cliffe's stamp factory today

Mr Bowen to design for him a purpose built new factory where under one roof the whole operation could be properly run. The first design in 1936 was, for its time, very futuristic and elegant. Indeed in a letter to the Colwyn Bay Council Mr. Cliffe wrote, "The Architect has a free hand to make a really attractive building and to arrange the layout to include a nice garden." But Mr. Cliffe's idea and Mr. Bowen's design exploded like a time

beginning of 1937 he gave up on the Colwyn Bay option and was quoted as saying "I was really beaten by the super-slow motion and apparent indifference shown to me".

The Rhyl Town Council was far more helpful and eager to accommodate his wishes. He decided therefore to re-locate the whole business in Rhyl where as he said, "In five hours of my time, and the architects time, spread over a period of

dormitory building at each end to house the workers, for although he was not enamoured of the members of the Colwyn Bay Town Planning Committee he was very loyal and appreciative of his Colwyn Bay workforce; indeed he even bought a bus to transport his workers from Colwyn Bay to Rhyl and back free of charge. He did not want them trailing unnecessarily to and fro between the towns and wanted them to stay overnight in the accommodation designed for them by Mr. Bowen. In fact it transpired that the ladies mostly preferred to spend their evenings at home in Colwyn Bay so that the dormitory building at the right hand end of the development became a canteen and care-takers home. These buildings are still in existence. The Care-takers home is now the offices of the Rhyl Registrar.

Before the 2nd World War the dairy industry in Colwyn Bay was organised by small independent dairymen serving their own localised area of the Bay. There was Frank Leach in Wynnstay Road, William Davies in Abbey Road, Ivor Godding in Sea View Road, the New Park Dairy in Lawson Road, the Princess Road Dairy in Old Colwyn, Clement Walker in Penrhyn Avenue, and Randal



Glan Bueno / White Gates

bomb in the local Council Chambers. Mr. Cliffe wanted the factory to be built at Barberrry Hill (Groes Road) Colwyn Bay on land owned by a Mr. Russell which did not go down well with the Town Planning Committee. The original suggested site had been behind the abattoir in Mochdre where the council would have helped Mr. Cliffe with some sort of financial subsidy. However Mr. Cliffe dismissed this site as being too humid. The Council members felt that the Barberrry Hill site was too near to what they described as the "Gateway to Colwyn Bay" and that all light industrial buildings should be grouped together in a more suitable location.

At this time Mr. Cliffe was employing about 50 people and he was anxious that they should remain in Colwyn Bay and that he be allowed to employ a lot more Colwyn Bay folk which this new building would help to accommodate. At the



Glan Bueno / White Gates

fourteen days, I did in Rhyl what I could not do in Colwyn Bay in almost two years and got that glorious feeling that I was not dealing with empty suits of clothes." The land he bought was on Marsh Road and Mr. Bowen designed a central block for the hub of the work and a smaller

Wilkinson of Roche Dale, Rhos-on-Sea. It was Mr. Wilkinson who, in the 1950's persuaded most of his competitors to get together and form a cooperative which eventually became Northern Dairies on Station Road, Mochdre. One of the dairymen who remained staunchly



Mr. Stainton's home

independent was William Stainton. The main outlet for his products was his Park House Dairy shop in the West End (now the Gainsboro Salon Hairdressers at No. 166 Conway Road).

In 1933 Mr. Stainton commissioned Mr. Bowen to design a detached bungalow for him to be built on a plot of land he had bought on Conwy Road, Mochdre which was built in 1937. There it still stands today (number 289a), slightly elevated above the road with a view down the Afon Ganol valley to Penrhyn Bay and the North Sea. Messrs Sidebottom and Son were the builders and a very professional job they made of it. The design is compact, regular and satisfying; the frontage on each side of the doorway complimenting each other.

Mr. Bowen charged £28.10.00 for the plans and the builder charged £713 for the construction. The house looks like a child's drawing; imaginative, steady, the offspring of enlightened parents. It is polite in its proportions. Mr. Bowen's specifications drawn up in November 1937 are very specific and detailed. He insisted that all the bricks should be "good, hard, well burnt, common bricks from Rhydymwyn". He wrote that "all glazed tile sills with groove for metal casements with throating under size 6" x 6" in Heather brown colour." As an arts and crafts admirer he was keen on having the woodwork right and so for Mr. Stainton he wrote, "All timber to be the best of its respective kind, free from many edges, shakes, sap, large loose or decayed knots, and other defects and except for

carpenter's work to be bone dry. Timber for carpenter's work to be fir unless otherwise specified".

Mrs. Stainton was related to the Meakin China firm in the Potteries and so they named the bungalow, Meakin. The house was designed with a large garage which Mr. Stainton converted into a milk bottling room and then built a new garage on the back of the bungalow. To do this he needed planning permission from the local authority and the local residents were canvassed for their views on the plan. One old lady a little further along the road objected and reportedly said: "oh no, that can't go ahead.. We don't know what Mr Stainton will get up to in there." During the war each dairyman was on what was called 'the block system'. In other words they were given a specific block or area to which they delivered the milk. This was done to conserve energy and petrol. Mr. Stainton's block was the Victoria Park area between his shop in the West End and his bungalow designed by Mr. Bowen.

By a serendipitous chance Mr. & Mrs. Stainton's daughter, Jackie (Bentley) now lives in another house designed by Mr. Bowen. He designed number 40 Lansdowne Road in 1937 for Mrs. E. A. Lake; and Mr. R. Hughes Williams was the builder. On completion the house was called Glan Bueno but is now known by Jackie as White Gates.

The house was originally called Glan Bueno because Mrs. Lake (by this time a widow) had come from Bont Newydd,

Caernarvon where she had lived in the large house called Glan Bueno. In English 'Glan' translates to 'the side of'; the local river in Bontnewydd is the Bueno, thus Mrs. Lake's former home stood beside the River Bueno, and her new Colwyn Bay home memorialised that fact.

It is a large substantial home with large rooms and a patio area (now enclosed as part of the lounge) on the front elevation.

The look of Mr. & Mrs. Stainton's bungalow is timeless, but their daughter's home is indicative of the 1930s when it was designed; plenty of character, plenty of angles, plenty of wood evident within and extremely well made. The stair-well has an open spacious gallery around it on the first floor landing, the front porch-way has a geometric framed surround and some of the interior doors retain their original wooden paneling.

By another coincidence, the two houses on either side of Mr. Bowen's creation were designed by his old pupil master, Sidney Colwyn Foulkes. (The Wren's Nest and Meldreth).

While he may have smiled at Frank Lloyd Wright and his choice of head gear there seems no doubt that he was influenced by the work of the American and admired his style and that of others such as Rennie Mackintosh. The Arts and Crafts, the Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles are clearly evident in Mr. Bowen's work in Rhondda, Cartre and White Cottage on Allanson Road, in 16 & 18 Whitehall Road and here at Glan Bueno / White Gate on Lansdowne Road.

In 1954, four years after Mr. Bowen's death, Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "I believe a house is more a home by being a work of art". In his life time William John Bowen had adhered to this dictum.

Mr Bowen was not a modernist like Le Corbusier designing buildings to shock his clients and make our mouths drop open in amazement. He was a man, however, as is evidenced in Mr. Stainton's home and that of his daughter, who designed modern buildings for their day which related to their neighbours, using natural materials and load-bearing walls so that the buildings would last and weather, remembering always the human need for light and air. He adapted his art to his surroundings and in so doing left us excellent examples of his talent as an artist, designer and architect.

Mr. Bowen designed The White House on Station Road, Old Colwyn for Mr. Owen J. Rowlands L.D.S.Liv. in 1935. It was specifically designed as a detached house including a dental surgery and remained a dentist's work place for the following sixty eight years, until the dentist using and owning the building in 2003, Mr. Charles Coffey, retired. For a while, in the 1980s when his home, Bodlondeb, off Cliff Gardens, was destroyed to make way for the A55 expressway, Dr. W. H. Mosbery took up residence in The White House. The contractor for the building work was Mr. R. Hughes Williams and it cost £2038.00. The building had a flat roof and the entire building was constructed with solid concrete. Unfortunately it was built on the old village tip and in the late 1990s, due to subsidence, huge cracks appeared in the walls and the roof began seriously leaking. The design was very contemporary for the staid architectural tastes of the Colwyn Bay people and attracted much comment. Much of Mr. Bowen's work was individualistic, Arts and Crafts influenced; his ideas were thoughtful and his own. The White House was a good example of his being forward looking and not being hide bound by convention. The Dental Surgery was a fine example of the Art Deco Movement discussed in the March 1996 edition of

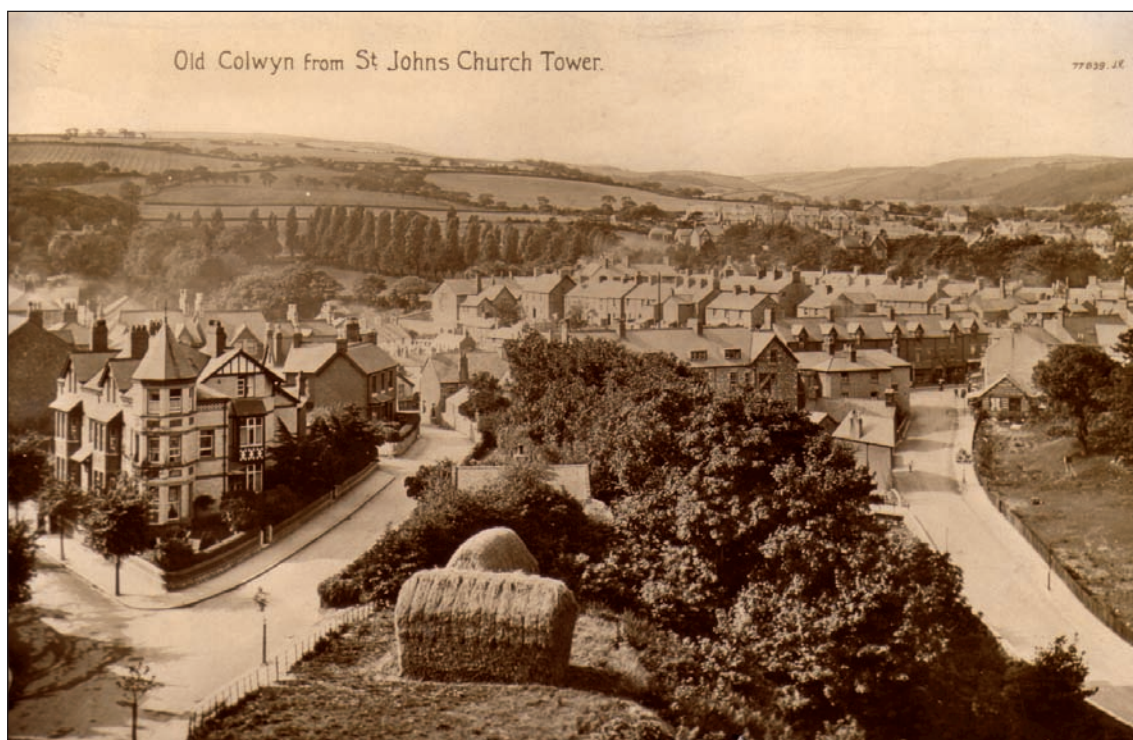
this Journal under the heading Art Deco Bay. The first sentence of this article declares: "Colwyn Bay does not have many buildings designed with a peculiarly idiosyncratic eye, redolent of their period." Well, while not being peculiar, certainly The White House was different and redolent of its period. Posterity, as Groucho Marx once observed, is a strange business. While it remained intact, after sixty years, Mr. Bowen's White House Dental Surgery looked different and delightfully modernistic. Sadly it has now been demolished and Tarmaster Jones Associates have designed a selection of three terraced houses which they have named Whitehouse Mews. The starting price for would be purchasers is £144.000.

'Willie John', as Mr. Bowen was affectionately known, was a prolific worker; he designed a pair of semi detached houses on Glyn Avenue, the new (in 1939) wing of Meredith and Kirkham Garage, Old Colwyn, a detached house on Brompton Avenue, houses on Pen-y-Bryn Road, as well as numerous extensions and alterations, and new dwellings in Abergele, Llanddulas, Llangernyw, Kinmel Bay and Betws-yn-Rhos.

William John Bowen, a man born at the beginning of the 20th Century, to a mother who was born in one of the most remote, and today, most desolate spots in Wales, Cwm Penmachno, with no previous architectural spirit in the family, must have been a confident, bright,

determined man to learn and develop his craft so well as to design modern houses still specifically expressive of their time. Today, 100 years after Mr. Bowen's birth, the Government, local authorities and property developers are covering this country with meanly proportioned, sub-standard housing. Rather than take bold steps to use modern materials and the latest design and engineering innovations, builders appear to have settled on the philosophy that the house you drew as a five year old is the house you wish to live in as an adult. This was not Mr. Bowen's way. He grew up and matured, he used contemporary designs and employed the latest materials and ideas. In the fifty six years since Mr. Bowen's early death we have seen more and more poorly built, unimaginative housing created in Wales; a process which I am sure Mr. Bowen would have considered a terrible mismanagement of the built environment.

In the winter of last year the Civic Trust For Wales and The Institute of Historic Building Conservation held a joint conference. The conference title was, "The past we inherit, the future we build." We should learn from what has worked well in the past, looking and learning particularly from the designs of Mr. Bowen, and adapt such designs for the 21st century. Paul Vanner wrote in an article after the conference, "Tradition is about bringing the best of the past into the present for the benefit of the future." The work of the William John Bowen is the very best of the past.



Haystacks mark the site of The White House, Old Colwyn. The dental surgery