

John Douglas 1830 - 1911

St. Paul's Church, Rhiw Road, Colwyn Bay, Christ Church, Bryn-y-Maen, (known locally and affectionately as "The Cathedral of the Hills"), St. John's The Baptist Church, Station Road, Old Colwyn, St. David's Welsh Church, Rhiw Road (next door to St. Paul's), the vicarage, Bryn-y-Maen and the vicarage, Colwyn Bay and Colwyn Bay Hotel (now the site of Princess Court), and Llety Dryw (on Abergele Road beside the approach to the Civic Centre), were all designed by Mr John Douglas. He designed some in partnership with Mr Fordham and some with Mr Minshull.

Mr Douglas designed about 500 buildings in Cheshire, North Wales and northwest England, in particular in the estate of Eaton Hall. His work is of particular interest for the importance he felt joinery and highly detailed wood carving should be

incorporated into his church designs. The end of the 19th Century was the period known architecturally as the Gothic Revival and Mr Douglas incorporated many elements of this influence into his Colwyn Bay churches. In Britain today more than 5,000 nationally designated sites are at risk of neglect, decay or misuse. A fifth of scheduled monuments are deemed under threat from decay or environmental change and it would be a disaster if Mr Douglas' inspirational efforts at enhancing our town's heritage were to fall into disrepair. We must acknowledge however the appalling financial difficulties that any parish must have in maintaining the fabric of their churches and we must do everything in our power by way of encouragement, persuasion and the highlighting especially of Mr Douglas' contribution to the local built environment.

Mr Douglas was the second of four children and the only son, of John Douglas and his wife Mary nee Swindley. Mary's father was the village blacksmith at Eccleston and John's father was a builder and joiner and it was from him that he first gained his knowledge and experience. In the late 1840s he was articled to E.G. Paley an architect in Lancaster and in 1860 he eventually established his own office at No.6 Abbey Square, Chester. In the same year he married Elizabeth Edmunds, a farmer's daughter, in a church which in later years he was to restore. They had five children, only two of whom survived to adulthood. According to the architectural historian Edward Hubbard, Douglas' life "seems to have been one of thorough devotion to architecture...which may well have been intensified by the death of his wife and other domestic worries". His



Colwyn Bay Hotel.

obituary in the Chester Chronicle stated that he “lived heart and soul in his profession”. He died on 23rd May 1911 aged 81 years and apart from his surviving buildings, only two memorials remain to his memory. One is a tablet in St. Paul’s Church, Boughton, the church in which he worshipped and which he had rebuilt. The other is a plaque placed on one of his buildings in St. Werburgh Street, Chester, in 1923 by his pupils and assistants.

When Mr D.R.Thomas visited Colwyn Bay in 1857, the only building he saw was one cottage and a toll bar. However eight years later, with the sale of Lady Erskine’s Pwllcrochan estate, the area began to be developed as a resort. Sir John Pender, a Glasgow merchant, bought the estate and his preferred architect was John Douglas. The pair of them made a triumphant visit to the town in 1872 when the train was greeted with flags, cheering crowds and a military band. By this time Mr Douglas’ vision for the new hotel on the promenade where Marine Road meets the sea front, was nearing completion. With its steep slate roofs and turrets, this was one of the largest buildings John Douglas ever designed and it was an appalling mistake made by the planning department of the time to allow the demolition of the building in 1974-5. The Colwyn Bay Hotel was uniquely monumental, built in stone from local quarries; it looked important, sturdy, the creation of someone with an obviously interesting mind; it was not bland, but interesting; when you entered the entrance hall you knew immediately that you were somewhere grand. And what has



St. Paul’s Vicarage.

replaced Mr Douglas’ design? We now have to bear the embarrassment of having a huge, bland, copy of a communist style block which would not look out of place in the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu’s Bucharest!

Fifteen years after he had submitted the plans for the Colwyn Bay Hotel, Mr Douglas completed the drawings for St. Paul’s Church, which thankfully still stands in the centre of Colwyn Bay. The nave was built in 1887-88, the chancel was not completed until six years later and the tower was built in the same year that Mr Douglas died. At the time he was in partnership with Mr Fordham but the completed church bears all the hallmarks of Mr Douglas’ personal ideas. It is in the form of a crucifix, it is large and has a five -

bay nave; the arcades are low and the clerestory tall. There is a magnificent rose window in the south transept and the whole thing is built with limestone and dressed and banded with red Runcorn stone. Edward Hubbard in ‘The Buildings of Wales’ notes especially the “treatment of corbels” and the “chunkily quirky sedilia”. There is a lovely wagon roof and Hubbard describes the tower (which Douglas never saw) as ‘noble’ and “bold, craggy and heavily buttressed”. The stalls display Douglas’ evident love of carpentry and detail which he learnt in his father’s workshop. It is a super Christian edifice and is a glorious ornament of the town.

At the same time Mr Douglas designed the church hall and the vicarage which all stand in the same ground between Rhiw Road and Woodland Road East. The vicarage is gabled and has white-painted leaded casements and is covered in polygonal limestone fragments as though many burly muscled workmen had spent a long time carefully pressing these pieces of stone into wet and pliable concrete over the entire outside area of the home. Sadly the vicarage is no longer used for its original purpose but it still stands and is used usefully.

When I was at school (50 years ago!) the past was the story of great men, wars, economic movements and ideologies, increasingly we now focus on the ordinary, fascinating everyday lives of our ancestors and while Charles Frost of Bryn-y-Maen was not what many people would describe as an ordinary man, he was not, never-the-less, a great and famous man; but his widow



Christ Church (The Sanctuary of the Hills), Bryn y Maen.



Bryn y Maen Vicarage

Eleanor thought he was worth having a church built in his memory. She must have seen St. Paul's Church being built and was sufficiently impressed as to employ the same architect, John Douglas. Thus it was that between 1896 and 1899 Christ Church Bryn-y-Maen was built. Although Mr Douglas never travelled abroad, he incorporated Gothic styles from continental countries, especially Germany and France. This combination of Gothic styles contributed to what has come to be known as the High Victorian style. It's features

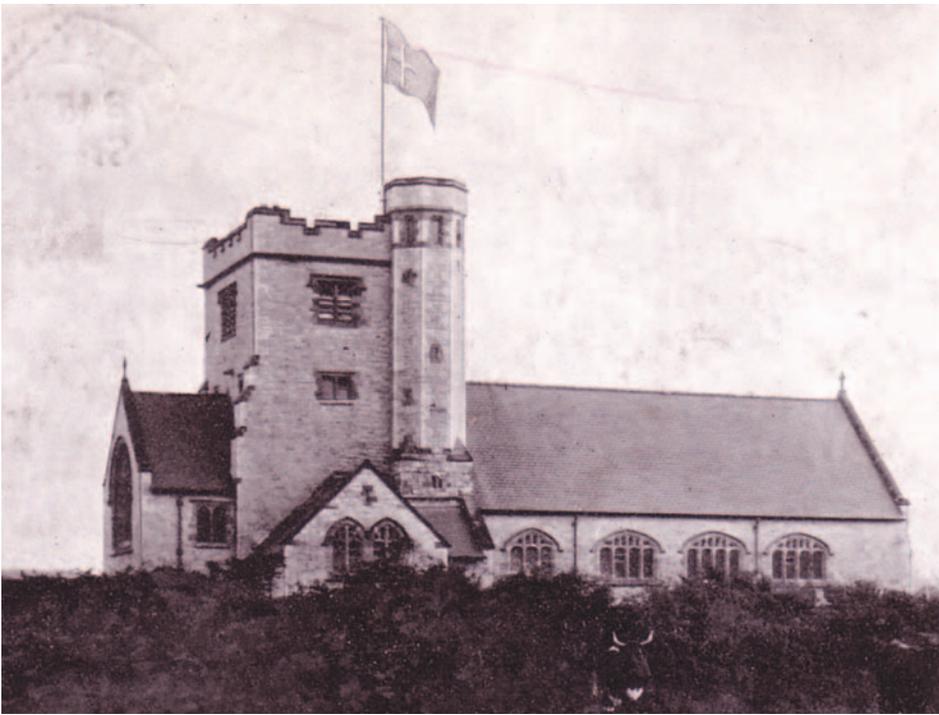
include a sense of massiveness and steep roofs which are often hipped. These themes can be seen in Christ Church but are softened and miniaturised to compliment the surrounding rolling farmland, the tiny village and the pastoral setting. The low spreading proportion and the fair pitch of the roof are ideally suited to the upland site in the hills above Colwyn Bay.

The tower of Christ Church is squat and massive, with battlements stepped up at the corners; and around the church are

tiny windows, artfully deployed. Local limestone walling is used with dressings of red Helsby stone, but there is little enriching of masonry, most of the ornamentation is concentrated on the woodwork. The nave roof, a form of hammerbeam, has tracery, and there is a set of characteristic Douglas furnishings, including the organ case, the stalls, pulpit, lectern, pews and the font cover, as well as the hymn board, the almsbox and the umbrella stand. The organ itself was built by Conacher of Huddersfield. The flooring



Bryn Eglwys, Bryn y Maen.



Christ Church (The Sanctuary of the Hills), Bryn y Maen.

of the chancel is of encaustic tiles and that of the nave of wood blocks. Underneath the foundation stone is a sealed glass bottle deposited in a cavity, in which was placed the 'London Times' of May 3rd, a Jubilee Medal, two stones from the Holy Land and a parchment on which was written the information about who laid the stone and in whose memory, Charles Frost, the church had been built. The serenity of the

church and its beauty have not faded with the years and it remains today a lovely example of Douglas' ability to adapt his plans to the surrounding countryside.

Directly across the road from this lovely church in its pastoral setting, know to local people as the 'Cathedral of the Hills' is the vicarage. This also was designed by Mr Douglas and Mr Fordham in 1898 and was

paid for by Mrs Frost. It is neo-Elizabethan in style and symmetrical three gabled front with barge boarded gables. Like his design for the St. Paul's vicarage, this vicar's home is again pebble dashed with hefty sized pebbles. One can not help wondering whether the same set of strong armed workmen had moved from property to property to finish off these exterior walls in this particularly Douglas fashion.

Just round the corner from the church and vicarage Mrs Frost employed Mr Douglas to design a house for herself which she called Bryn Eglwys (Church Hill). This sturdy home is described by Edward Hubbard as displaying "coped gables, a gabled porch, and shaped heads to window lights". All three buildings still stand to day as a tribute to Mr Douglas' imagination and to Mrs Frost's generosity.

In Britain more people devote more time to old buildings than ever before; yet the fabric of Britain's built heritage is perishing at an astonishing and accelerating rate. Fortunately our ancient buildings are protected by a wide patchwork of defences and charities, local and national, public and private. Such a building is St. John the Baptist Church on Station Road, Old Colwyn where the local community has worked hard at maintaining the structure and improving the interior. The Church was started the same year that the builders finished on Christ Church in Bryn-y-Maen and it took three years to complete.



St. David's Church, Colwyn Bay.



Llety Dryw.



St. John's Church, Old Colwyn.

The tower was not built until 1912 the year after Mr Douglas' death. The Church rightly dominates the surrounding domestic landscape but does not seem over powering or intrusive. In the main local limestone was used and red Cheshire sandstone was used for the dressing. The Church was fortunate in its local benefactor, Mrs Elinor Frost, for she donated all the fittings for the chancel, the carved oak reredos, the alter rails, screen and the pulpit. As well as keeping an eye on the well being of the church structure the church congregation has also worked hard on the surrounding gardens and they are now a delight to walk around. Place is a portal to history more powerful than any

textbook and you only have to enter St. John the Baptist Church to be transported back a century when fine design and good workmanship were the order of the day. It is obvious from looking at St. Paul's, Christ Church and St. John's that Mr Douglas' reputation was well merited and the church authorities held him in great esteem.

Indeed the ecclesiastical community continued to use his services (this time in partnership with Mr Minshull) for the design of St. David's Church, where it was intended the Welsh speaking community of Colwyn Bay would worship. It took a year to build in 1902 1903 and is beside St.

Paul's Church on Rhiw Road where both congregations share the same clergyman. A lovely landmark is the substantial square bellcote which rises from the roof, with its own pyramid roof surmounted by an octagonal spirelet. The building is small and straight forward; Edward Hubbard writes that it has an "apsidal sanctuary and battered buttresses" and that the "west window is Neo-Perpendicular". The lovely screen inside was made by a local blacksmith, David Jones.

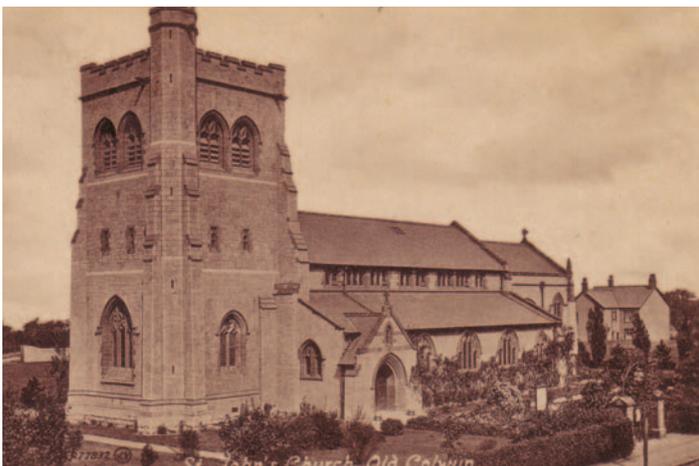
by Mr Douglas in 1893 for Mr John Eden as a private residence. There is a letter E carved above the porch of the house. Mr Eden was the uncle of the future Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, who is believed to have spent some of his holidays in the house. It was built between the construction of St. Pauls and Christ Church, Bryn-y-Maen and is a striking example of Mr Douglas' genius for designing good large houses. It is designed with cross wings and in the angle of one of the wings is a storeyed porch with an ornamental lintel. Experts say that it is inspired by the 17th century vernacular work of northern England although there is no central living hall as there would have been in a 17th Century home. It is a striking design with coped and finialed gables which a lot of people, whizzing along Abergele Road, do not see because the house is partially hidden behind a line of tall trees.

Mr Douglas lived to see all his churches, vicarages and houses in Colwyn Bay completed, except for a couple of towers. Our town is all the better for his hard work and ability as a first rate architect. He left this town a memorable legacy in which buildings can summon memory and evoke history in a way that even books, painting and poetry cannot. Like us, buildings are in a state of constant, ineluctable decay; unlike us, human action can preserve them indefinitely. They are a form of immortality, which in Mr Douglas' case, transforms him also into someone who should be recognised for ever more by us as a transforming influence on our lives.

It is a quirk of human nature which allows us to view as peculiarly heartening the interment of others in obituary terms, recalling as we do, the deceased's achievements in what they have left on this earth. John Douglas, we can be happy to report, that as a testament to his conservatism in the true sense of the word, left wonderful buildings here in Colwyn Bay; evidence of his being a foe of mindless or unscrupulous change and his ability to convey atmosphere with strict economy of means. We are grateful to him.



Llety Dryw. Inscription above the door.



St. John's Church, Old Colwyn.

Between St. Paul's Church in Colwyn Bay and St. John's Church in Old Colwyn, on Abergele Road, beside the present driveway down to the Civic Centre is a noteworthy house, Llety Dryw, designed

The St. Andrew's Window

Mr James Robinson and his wife Ruth were a remarkable couple. In the early part of the last century they lived with their four children in The Croft, on the corner of Brackley Avenue and Oak Drive. Mr Robinson was the director of a large textile firm in Manchester, Messrs Mather and Platt. He and his wife were kindly, generous hearted people and were

all the Sandford children for the duration of the war. Their son, James Cliff Edmeston Robinson, was twenty four when the war began and he joined the RAF. One of the evacuees from Liverpool, Jim, remembers to this day the last time he saw James, on the door step of The Croft, looking dashing in his blue uniform, hugging his mother goodbye and shaking his

to return and fish the Sea of Galilee today (2010) he might tell a parable, not of prolific catches and the sated crowds of biblical times, but of empty nets. Annual catches of the St. Peter's fish, which takes its name from the New Testament story in which Jesus' disciple, Peter, netted a fish with a gold coin in its mouth- and paid his taxes with it- have dropped from 300 tonnes to just 8. Fortunately Mrs Robinson never lived to hear this modern turn of events.



Mrs Robinson laying the extension foundation stone in 1924



St. Andrews. Window in the centre.

enthusiastic supporters of St. Andrew's Church, indeed Mrs Robinson laid the foundation stone for the extension of the church, designed by Mr Ernest Burnett (NB Journal September, 2002:) on the 12th November 1924. In 1939 as evidence of their open Christian spirit they readily opened their home to eleven evacuees, five children from Liverpool, five from London and Olive, the niece of their cook. Three children from Liverpool, the eldest of whom was twelve years old, were next door neighbours with the other two, (the 3 Robinsons and 2 Quinns) while those from London, the Sandfords, were all from the same family.

Mr and Mrs Robinson had five grown up children, four daughters and one son. Indeed it had been one of the girls, Kathleen, who had become a doctor in London and had delivered twins to Mrs Sandford, who suggested to her mother that it would be a good idea to look after

father's hand. A year later during the Battle of Britain, aged 25, he was shot down over the English Channel and never seen again.

As a memorial to her son Mrs Robinson arranged and paid for the stained glass window that adorns the west end of St. Andrew's Church. (NB Journal, September 2001: 'Our Colourful Glass'). The vibrant, colourful glass depicts a scene beside the Sea of Galilee from The Bible. Two separate miracles occurred beside the Sea of Galilee. One involved the filling of the fishermen's empty nets with a multitudinous catch and the second miracle involved 5,000 people being fed with two fish and five loaves. It is poignant to speculate whether in choosing a scene beside this biblical sea Mrs Robinson was commemorating two other miracles; the sacrifice her son made for his country and the selfless love and kindness she bestowed on eleven poor evacuees. In the window, St. Andrew is naturally the central figure who is shown having had the call to follow Jesus; Peter is seen seated while working on his fishing nets and James and John are on St. Andrew's right hand side. At the bottom of each panel are the symbols which are used to identify the figures. Jesus on the extreme right has an oyster shell; John the cauldron, there is a lobster pot for St. Andrew and at St Peter's feet is a basket containing fishes. The picture of the prickly bush with the red flowers is a hyssop, a flower which is common in the Holy Land. Sadly, were Jesus



Mrs. Robinson's window on the right.

Mrs Robinson's endeavour to see this lovely window installed in St. Andrew's Church is an apt celebration of the craftsman as well as the academic and is something that our nation has lost and which we need to recapture. Winston Churchill said, maybe echoing Mrs Robinson's thoughts, that he wanted a country where "finance was less proud and industry more content". This was an ideal to which the Robinson family as a whole fastened on to. The window is absolutely glorious and with the afternoon sun behind it, it is a revelation; bright, interesting with gorgeous colouring. In an age when we seem to take delight in the second rate and the mediocre, when Tracey Emin is showered with praise for arranging an unmade bed and Damien Hirst is invited to exhibit a cupboard full of differently coloured medicine bottles, it is exhilarating and moving to see in a Colwyn Bay church, St. Andrew's, a straight forward depiction, in stunning stained glass, of an ever-green Bible scene. All our sons are precious to us and in this church there shines the everlasting truth of that fact.

Although it was James' death while defending his country, that stung Mrs Robinson into commissioning the St. Andrew's window, it was dedicated forty seven years ago in memory of herself and of her husband.



St. Andrews Window.

Who made The Bay? We did.



Rhos form the Pier.

Where ever we look in Colwyn Bay, we and our forefathers are responsible for the urban view. It is our town and we must be robust in its defence, for we have no one else to blame for our surroundings. The first of these Journals was issued in April 1989 and it is instructive to look back and discover how much this town has altered in the intervening twenty one years.

Carlyle famously wrote, "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." We could adapt that and say that Colwyn Bay is the history of past generations of good people who loved this town. Someone once said jokingly that 'the future is not what it used to be'. But then again the future is what we are looking at and we trust that our decisions now will stand this town in good stead for generations to come. Are we too passive in our views as a society? I heard the housing development at the top of Eberston Road West described as a Lilliputian village; a picturesque fairyland where at any moment you expect Hansel and Gretel to pop out of a doorway. They are, someone said, 'domestic toy houses grown to adult size'. Would you agree with that? The new Government has already said: "We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their

inhabitants live." So perhaps our views will carry some weight in the future.

Vladimir Nabokov said that the "kindly mirrors of future times will reflect ordinary objects". Nostalgia combines both memory and the kindly mirrors of future times. We owe it to our children to make sure that what they see in Colwyn Bay will be of merit, will be decent and will be vital to their needs. The world is changing so fast, seemingly ever quicker with every passing day, that we must of necessity stop and think and be careful about the way we change our town and that what we alter will hopefully be for the better. We scour the past for our antecedents and delve into family history as never before. Yet we treat our own contemporary everyday history as a disposable commodity. Far from preserving history technology is helping to erode it. Officials delete swaths of

electronic information routinely. We must take care not to treat our surroundings likewise in such a cavalier manner. Let what is useful and looks impressive remain; what is architecturally good and innovative should be preserved. But this should not blind us to an understanding of the idea that those buildings that have served their purpose and now look dowdy, should go. There was a recent letter in the Daily Telegraph written on behalf of forty charities and social entrepreneurs which stressed the important role played by local communities in shaping the future of their local areas. I am sure this is a sentiment with which we would agree.

We tend to think of our town as solid, a dependable thing with fixed points and enduring landmarks. In reality though, they are fluid, and as transient as a breath. This society believes that the correct decision



The Bay 2010.

was made regarding Hermon Chapel (NB November Journal 2009), Sterndale, Eberston Road West, Tan-y-Bryn Hotel, Rhos Abbey Hotel, Rockwood and Bryndinarth (the home of Mr William Horton JP) both on Tan-y-Bryn Road. The sooner the United Reformed Church Room on the corner of Penrhyn Avenue and Colwyn Avenue, comes down, the better. And what about the knotty question of The Pier; go and have a good look at

it, what is its purpose now? Sadly, has it passed its sell by date? Miss Matty, the character played by Judi Dench in Cranford, remarks wisely; "change or its refusal is not within our gift". That would make a good motto for our Society.

Since 1989 these pages have featured many men who have strived to enhance our built environment; architects like Sydney Colwyn Foulkes, William John Bowen and his younger brother Stuart Powell Bowen, John Douglas, Tom Griffiths, Gwylm Parry Davies and Brian Lingard; and builders such as Mr Gorst, Mr Ashworth, and Mr Tylsdley, George Essex and Humphrey Morris the Rhyl firm of Anwyl's and R.W.Fitz Aucher. All these

men have been employed in the worthwhile task of improving our town and we owe them a debt of gratitude. Let us as a Society keep a vigilant eye on the work and plans that are now being formulated to change our surroundings, so that future generations will not look back and decry us for our laziness.

Nostalgia is a fraudulent emotion which makes us prey to pangs of regret for past experiences which are no substitute for a real vision of our future happiness and well being. We must not fall into the trap of believing in the type of nostalgia that summons memories that do not belong to us. We must remain open to the possibility that our constructive urges can lead

unerringly to the necessity for destruction. (NB Hermon Chapel. Journal November 2009). Destruction of the useless and of what is second rate and moribund (Merton Place, Pwlycrochan Avenue), allows us the exciting possibility to construct a building which will be useful and worthwhile for our children.

Our aspirations should be inter-generational, where the present comes out of the past and looks into the future. What is good only for one generation at one moment is almost certainly bad for all of us. Let us therefore look to the future with optimism and think not only of ourselves but about the future generations for whom Colwyn Bay will be home.

Laying the foundation stone at Colwyn Bay Crematorium, 16th August 1955



Left to right.

Walter Ashworth (the builder); Leonard Moseley (the architect); John Richard (Jack) Watson (in the background: Clerk of Works for the Council: NB Journal February 2008); Unknown: The Vicar of Llangwstenin, the Rev. J. L. Jones; The Mayor Councillor Edward Jones J.P.; Harold Braithwaite (the Town Clerk); Unknown