

Extrait de «Laos», 1951

Iorwerth C. Peate

THE WELSH FOLK MUSEUM AND ITS
DEVELOPMENT

UPPSALA 1951

ALMQVIST & WIKSELLS BOKTRYCKERI AB

The Welsh Folk Museum and its Development

by IORWERTH C. PEATE, ST. FAGANS

Amgueddfa Werin Cymru (the Welsh Folk Museum) at St. Fagans represents an attempt at setting up for Wales a museum of Welsh life and culture on the principles exemplified in the many Scandinavian folk museums. The British countries have been slow to adopt this form of museum development and the only national folk museum hitherto established in the British Isles is the small but delightful Manx folk museum at Creg Neash, established in 1938. Here however a small group of buildings was acquired *in situ* and no re-erection was necessary.

Wales can claim to have been for many years a pioneer British country in fostering the collection of folk material and in folk life research. In the second half of the 19th century and during the early years of the present century there were in Wales pioneers who understood the importance of collecting what they then termed 'by-gones', as well as folk lore itself. Much of their inspiration came from the work of the Welshman Sir John Rhys and of others such as the folklorist Hartland who had associations with Wales. The Welsh magazines and journals at the end of the last century — particularly those edited by the late Sir Owen Edwards — are full of material of interest to the folk student.

A band of enthusiasts (amongst whom T. H. Thomas, the artist, and T. C. Evans, the Glamorgan local historian, were prominent) collected for the Cardiff Municipal Museum, merged into the National Museum of Wales when that institution was founded by Royal Charter in 1907, when the small but important collection of 'Welsh Bygones' was transferred to it.

The National Museum of Wales itself combines the functions of a natural-history museum, a national art gallery, a museum of antiquities and a science museum and the collection of 'by-gones' therefore found a temporary home in the Department of Archaeology. Luckily, the first Keeper of Archaeology (the late John Ward) took a personal interest in the collection, although, quite naturally, he looked upon 'by-gones' with an archaeologist's eye, as old-fashioned things which had completely vanished. They represented to him merely the last stage of an archaeological period. However, the first exhibition of Welsh folk material was arranged by him in 1913. The next was by another archaeologist, Sir Cyril Fox, in 1926. Sir Cyril's subsequent contribution to the folk-museum movement in Wales was outstanding.

The collection came under the present writer's care in 1927 when it was completely relabelled in Welsh as well as in English. In 1929 the *Guide to the Collection of Welsh Bygones* was issued by the National Museum. This received a warm welcome in Wales and initiated the systematic and extensive collection of Welsh folk material

with the result that the small 'bygones' collection grew in the space of a few years into a great national folk collection. In 1930 the Museum Council sent Sir Cyril to Sweden with the result that on his return it accepted the principle of the creation of a Folk Museum for Wales.

With the growth of the folk collection and the setting up of new galleries in Cardiff, including a series of reconstructions of farmhouse rooms and craft workshops, the Department of Folk Life in the National Museum was created in 1936. A visit in 1934 by Dr. C. von Sydow of Lund and Dr. Åke Campbell of Uppsala contributed materially to this development. In the next few years more than one unofficial — and unsuccessful — attempt was made to secure land for the creation of a Welsh Folk Museum. A questionnaire on Welsh folk culture was prepared in 1937 and distributed so helping to create a large band of unofficial collectors in every district in Wales. Throughout the 1930's much material and information concerning every aspect of Welsh life were collected. In 1943 a National Museum of Wales Council report declared that the creation of a folk museum was one of the chief needs of post-war reconstruction.

In 1946, the Earl of Plymouth offered St. Fagans Castle and its eighteen acres of gardens and grounds as a centre for a Welsh Folk Museum. St. Fagans is ideally placed. As Skansen is to Stockholm and Bygdøy to Oslo, so St. Fagans is merely a short bus ride from the centre of Cardiff. At the same time it lies in the heart of the beautiful Vale of Glamorgan, Plate I. A population of over one million people is within easy distance of it. An additional tract of eighty acres of adjacent parkland was also secured. There are therefore about one hundred acres of land available for the creation of the national Welsh Folk Museum, with the first exhibit in it, the Elizabethan mansion known as St. Fagans Castle, already *in situ*.

The Welsh Folk Museum is to be a museum of Welsh life and culture. It is therefore imperative that it should be in two parts — a modern block of buildings for the scientific exhibition of life and culture and an open-air section where Welsh buildings can be seen in their environmental setting. In the museum block, to be built at the centre of the site, will be galleries where material illustrating all aspects of Welsh folk life will be displayed — domestic and farm implements, furniture, dress, craft, implements, social, cultural and folklore material, all placed in galleries or in reserve collections for the use of research workers. Here also will be the offices, workrooms and archives and, we trust, a theatre and concert-hall. It is hoped to house here data relating to all aspects of the traditional culture. It will become, it is hoped, a storehouse and a national centre for all information relating to Welsh life — in short, an institute for Welsh folk research, where lecture courses and summer schools

Pl. 1. St. Fagans Castle and part of the village of St. Fagans. Below the castle is seen part of the 13th-century castle curtain-wall.

Pl. 2. The kitchen of St. Fagans Castle. Note the two fireplaces, the dog-wheel for spit-turning and the bread crate.