

Aberglasney, Carmarthenshire

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With a history dating back to the 13th century, the Aberglasney estate in the parish of Llangathen in Carmarthenshire, south-west Wales was long established when it was purchased at the turn of the 19th century by an East India Company man, Thomas Philipps (c.1749-1824). Aberglasney had been in decline under its previous inhabitants, the Dyers, who were finally forced to sell due to heavy debts. The estate was sold for 10,000 guineas to Thomas Philipps in 1803. The Aberglasney case study highlights the importance of the process of homecoming and the returning to the familiarity of home. In this instance, a modest estate was purchased to reflect the lifestyle desired of a country gentleman who wished to live the rest of his life in quiet retirement following a large portion of his life spent building his career in India.

Thomas Philipps and the purchase of Aberglasney



Figure 1. Aberglasney mansion today. Image courtesy of Lowri Ann Rees.

The son of a Pembroke tanner, Thomas Philipps travelled to India c.1768-70 as a surgeon with the East India Company on completing his medical studies. He spent the next thirty-two years there, during that time rising to become Head Surgeon. In India, he accumulated enough money to allow him to return home to Wales and invest in a landed estate. By 1800 he had invested £25,000 in the East India Company's funds and on his retirement was awaiting a substantial pension.¹ In 1799 Thomas Philipps wrote to his sister, Bridget Walters, and to his father (another Thomas Phillips, but who had kept the original spelling of the family name) from India informing them that he proposed to return to Wales around 1804-05 after saving sufficient money, hoping to retire on a pension of £300 a year, and more specifically, wished to purchase a country estate in south-west Wales. He asked his father to enquire after a small estate generating around £100 to £200 per annum.² Bridget wrote to her brother in India with news of a desirable property, Aberglasney, which she described as a 'sweet place, the situation is delightfull [sic]', referring to the 'very hansom [sic] mansion', which she predicted could not have been built for less than £4,000. The estate generated an annual income of around £500 and there were ample opportunities for improvement work.³

Thomas Philipps's father and lawyer brother, John Philipps, worked hard to secure the Aberglasney estate on his behalf, in what was a long drawn out and complicated purchase, with Thomas Philipps facing difficulties transferring his finances from India to Wales. At this point there is a link with another *East India Company at Home* case study, that of Middleton Hall, also in Carmarthenshire. John Philipps had approached William Paxton (c.1744-1824), who had purchased nearby Middleton Hall in c.1789, asking whether his agency house would be willing to advance the money required to purchase Aberglasney. John Philipps explained to Paxton 'the estate is so desirable for my Brother that *you would be truly his friend* could you serve him in getting his money'.⁴ Nonetheless, after much consideration, Paxton declined to help, writing 'I am sorry to inform you that at present I see no prospect of being able to assist you in the purchase which appears to be so much to your Brother's advantage'.⁵ Paxton was a shrewd businessman, and could potentially see problems in guaranteeing the return of his money, as transferring finances from India to Britain could be problematic. After speaking so highly of Paxton, John Philipps wrote to Charles Cockerell, a partner in the firm of Paxton, Cockerell, Trail and Co. 'I am afraid my Brother has but little chance of meeting with any thing [sic] like friendship or assistance from the House of Messers Paxton's and Co'.⁶ He exclaimed to his brother that the conduct of Paxton and his

¹F. Jones, 'Aberglasney and its families', *National Library of Wales Journal*, xxi (1979-80), p.15.

² Carmarthenshire Record Office (CRO) Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Copy of a letter from Thomas Philipps in India to his father, Thomas Phillips (1 May 1799).

³ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Letter from Bridget Walters to her brother, Thomas Philipps (4 June 1801).

⁴ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Copy of a letter from John Philipps to William Paxton (30 October 1801). Italics represent John Philipps's emphasis.

⁵ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Copy of a letter from William Paxton, Pall Mall, to John Philipps (6 November 1801).

⁶ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Copy of a letter from John Philipps, George's Coffee House, Temple Bar, to Charles Cockerell, 57 Pall Mall (31 October 1802).

agency house towards them had been 'unhandsome in the extreme, I will not now give it a harsher name'.⁷

Aberglasney house and gardens

During the closing years of the Dyer era, Aberglasney mansion deteriorated greatly, therefore, on securing Aberglasney for his brother, John Philipps went about preparing the house for the arrival of the new owner. Thomas Philipps commenced his journey home in January 1805 and on his arrival in London lodged at 22 Bury Street. During the period 1803-05, John Philipps worked tirelessly to update the mansion. The house itself had evolved over the centuries, with each successive family adding a new wing or extension to the mansion. During Thomas Philipps's era a portico and circular drive were instated at the side of the mansion. Extensive work was carried out inside and outside the mansion. Philipps installed new doors and grates within and mended the windows, leading and roof. He also instigated tiling and painting and had servant bells installed throughout the house. Bills and receipts show that items were being purchased from London in order to furnish and equip the house with luxury goods.⁸ John Philipps had ambitions to raise the social standing of his family, indeed, having worked so hard to secure the estate, he vowed in a letter written to his father that the estate would never leave the family again.⁹ Therefore John Philipps went about conforming to the ideals of conspicuous consumption, buying the finest furniture and interior decorations from the best craftsmen in the country. Items bought from London ranged from curtains, carpets and wallpapers to vast quantities of silverware, china and glass. Many of these, such as glassware and silverware, were engraved with Thomas Philipps's initials and the family's coat of arms.¹⁰ This process was important, as it reinforced the family's identity, and helped create an image of gentility and noble lineage. John Philipps encapsulated the ambitions of the family when he declared in a letter to his brother:

At this place we are surrounded with great folks, perhaps there is not a neighbourhood in England superior to it – I sometimes feel the pride of my family, wick [sic] is inferior to none of them, its as ancient as the best pedigree which I have extracted from the Herald Office.¹¹

⁷ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Letter from John Philipps, Carmarthen, to his brother Thomas Philipps (9 November 1802).

⁸ Jones, 'Aberglasney and its families', p. 20.

⁹ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/515. Letter from Thomas Philipps the younger, Dinapore, to his father, Thomas Philipps the elder (20 August 1802).

¹⁰ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/521. Letter from Thomas Philipps, Aberglasney to Messrs Savory, Farrard and Sheldrick, goldsmiths, jewellers and cutlers, 48 Cheapside, London (2 September 1806); Jon Stobart refers to the emphasis on lineage in addition to fashion and taste in relation to consumption patterns and the country house in 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, lxiv, 3 (2011), pp. 885-904.

¹¹ CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Letter from John Philipps, Llandeilo, to his brother, Thomas Philipps (29 June 1801).

In the grounds surrounding the mansion several trees were planted, and the ornamental pond drained, cleaned and restored.¹²

Thomas Philipps finally arrived at Aberglasney in April 1807. Later in 1807 he received confirmation that he could retire on a pension of £300 per annum.¹³ He lived the remainder of his life at Aberglasney with his mistress, Mrs Jane Moore, as stated in his will 'late residing with me in India and now with me at Aberglasney'.¹⁴ It was only in 1823, a year before his death, that Philipps and Mrs Moore married, her position being more secure as Philipps's wife rather than his mistress. Thomas Philipps's family referred to her as Mrs Philipps in correspondence to gloss over what would have been seen as a scandal. Thomas Philipps's time at Aberglasney was marred by his broken health, which deteriorated significantly during the last ten years of his life. Nonetheless, he became involved in public duties on the local level, and as magistrate faithfully attended the quarter sessions when his health permitted.¹⁵

On Thomas Philipps's death in 1824, his sister's only son, John Walters, inherited the Aberglasney estate, and according to the terms of his late uncle's will, adopted the Philipps surname and merged the Walters and Philipps family coat of arms. The estate remained within the family until the 1950s, and following successive sales, was purchased by the Aberglasney Restoration Trust during the 1990s. The mansion still stands, and along with the gardens, has been undergoing renovation and restoration. Both the mansion and gardens were opened to the public in 1999.¹⁶

Conclusion

The Aberglasney case study can also be linked with another *East India Company at Home* case study, that of [Swallowfield Park](#), written by Margot Finn. Henry Russell worked with his brother Charles to find and purchase a suitable estate on his return from India. The Swallowfield Park and Aberglasney case studies show how the process of homecoming could involve the whole family working together in order to help the returning East India Company man integrate back into British society, at a social level befitting of their new found fortunes.

The Aberglasney case study can be viewed in contrast with another south-west Wales case study, Middleton Hall, which was purchased by the wealthy Scottish born William Paxton. Whilst Philipps had generated a modest income during his time in India, Paxton had amassed a fortune, and perhaps the difference in wealth is reflected in the difference in aspirations. Whilst Philipps was content to live the remainder of his life at Aberglasney and

¹² C. S. Briggs, 'Aberglasney: the theory, the history and archaeology of a post-medieval landscape', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, xxxiii (1999), p. 261.

¹³ Jones, 'Aberglasney and its families', p. 22.

¹⁴ The National Archives (TNA) PROB 11/1695. Will of Thomas Philipps (19 September 1804).

¹⁵ CRO Carmarthenshire Quarter Sessions Order Books.

¹⁶ P. David, *A Garden Lost in Time: The Mystery of the Ancient Gardens of Aberglasney* (London, 1999).

partake in public duties on the local level, living within his means, Paxton, in contrast, had far grander plans and ambitions of a seat in parliament, a knighthood and involvement in larger improvement schemes and urban regeneration. Whilst both had their sights firmly set on a landed estate, with a desire to establish within elite society, Philipps saw this desire of upward social mobility at the county level, whilst Paxton's ambitions were at a national level. On one hand we have the returning native, whilst on the other the ambitious newcomer.