

A very personal Classicism

Coed Mawr, Radnorshire

The home of Craig Hamilton and his wife, Diana Hulton

An architect's house offers a stylish and thought-provoking exploration of neo-Classicism.

John Martin Robinson reports

Photographs by Paul Highnam



↑ Fig 1 above: Coed Mawr in its valley, with the new ranges on the left. The San Gimignano cloister is visible in the right foreground. → Fig 2 facing page: The library/drawing room. The Portland stone chimneypiece was made to Craig Hamilton's design

WITH their small farms and neatly hedged fields, the hills of Radnorshire form a surprising setting for a strikingly original new Classical house. Coed Mawr means 'large wood', and the buildings are set in a grove of oak and ash trees on the side of a valley (Fig 1). The low, whitewashed component structures and little enclosed courts and gardens have something of the appearance of an old Greek monastery. It is a harmonious combination of archaic simplicity and artistic sophistication.

The nucleus is a typical old Welsh farmhouse, dating from about 1500, comprising a single-hall cruck house with an open hearth and attached cow house. In about 1650, a new parlour was added, as well as a big stone chimney to the hall. In the 18th century, the cow house was demolished, and three adjoining barns were built. The place survived in that form until it was insensitively 'modernised' in the 1970s and 1980s, and expanded with the addition of various concrete block-work shacks. The farm of 80 acres, house and buildings was acquired by Craig Hamilton and his wife, painter Diana Hulton, in 1995.

The works to the house have been undertaken in stages, beginning with the restoration of the old buildings. In this work, every

effort was made to re-create lost details and respect the character of the farmhouse itself. The barn opposite was converted as ancillary accommodation, with a modern kitchen and bathrooms, as well as a book-lined study with oak shelves and stone chimneypiece designed by the architect. Meanwhile, the narrow courtyard between these two ranges was stone-flagged and closed at one end by a simple Classical arch of whitewashed rubble. At the same time, the two additional small barns beyond were converted to architects' workspaces and drawing offices for Mr Hamilton's practice.

This initial transformation of the house with its separated elements was not entirely practical. It was, therefore, decided to build a new wing connecting the farm and accommodation range across the end of the courtyard. This newly completed work uses the steep fall of the land to create imposing rooms 13ft high (as opposed to 7ft 6in in the old part). It is, moreover, a remarkable piece of modern Classical architecture, and transforms the whole place into a romantic vision of the Ancient World through a lens tinted by Schinkel, Cockerell, Klenze and Bindsboll.

The ambition of the new work is not apparent to the approaching visitor, who sees only the old farmhouse and a high, plain





↑ Fig 3: The south front of the new wing is inspired by the work of the 19th-century Danish architect N. G. Bindsboll. The Pompeian casts are from the Bronze Foundry in Naples, started in the 18th century and still in business. The Athenian Treasury is visible over the wall

flanking wall. Its formal entrance, however, is a harbinger of the delights to come, like a glint in the eye betokening an interesting mind. This doorway is modelled on the Choragic Monument of Thrasyllus on the slopes of the Acropolis, as recorded by Athenian Stuart. It has a single square central pier, rare—but not unique—in Classical architecture. Such a recessed porch also provides practical cover from Welsh rain. The inner doorcase, with a broad stone corona, has a central panel inscribed in Greek 'Know Thyself', as at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

Within lies a compact, toplit lobby, 8ft square, with a painted timber coffered ceiling. The floor is paved with *Rosso Impero* marble banded with polished Ulverston limestone: Roman Antique and British geological in happy combination. Ahead is a part-glazed door to the Welsh vernacular courtyard and, to the right, a link to the Tudor hall. This entrance vestibule spans worlds and evokes intriguing contrasts, as the south side is an open Grecian screen with stone pilasters and a central, fluted Corinthian column. It is inspired by the Temple of Apollo at Bassae (discovered by Klenze and Cockerell), which is both the earliest use of the Corinthian Order and the most famous centrally placed column from Antiquity, all reproduced here on a miniature domestic scale. Ulverston stone steps, with a bronze handrail, lead

down to a toplit antechamber. It is reminiscent of spaces in the Thorwaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, an analogy emphasised by the strong colouring, wall reliefs, and, especially, the life-size plaster cast of Thorwaldsen's *Ganymede and the Eagle*.

The new range is single-storeyed and contains a library-drawing room (Fig 2) on the Regency pattern and a formal dining room directly linked on the far side of the courtyard by a little pantry. In this way, the replanning has enhanced the practical side of the domestic arrangements at Coed Mawr, with a large, centrally placed living room, and easy access to the kitchen from the dining room.

The new principal room is 32ft long and 18ft wide, and is divided into two by a screen of porphyry Ionic columns. These are based on the Order of the Erechtheion in Athens, much used by late-18th-century English architects. Although seemingly of marble, they are of turned sycamore by Will Bullough, painted to simulate red porphyry by Richard Eastland, who has been responsible for much of the specialist craftsmanship at Coed Mawr. The Ionic capitals were modelled in clay by Steve Lane and cast in plaster by Mr Eastland.

The entrance part of the space is the Library (Fig 4), with glazed bookcases of pearwood, designed by the architect and made by Mr Bullough. The area beyond is the Drawing Room, and has a striking chimneypiece of

Portland stone made by Jamb. It reflects Mr Hamilton's originality in handling the Classical language of architecture, fusing ideas from several sources in it to create something freshly new. Crucially, the details of the room are not copied from any historic English example. The sidepieces are drawn from Grecian *stеле*, carved with Roman *bucrania*, and the flanking scrolls are reminiscent of Michelangelo's Florentine work.

The ceilings of both parts of the room are comprised of painted timber beams and coffers with plaster rosettes, but they are differentiated to indicate function. The Library has only nine large coffers with nine large rosettes, modelled on those of the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome. The Drawing Room has 90 small coffers with 90 small rosettes based on those of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. Their smaller scale reflects the more human, domestic character of the sitting area, and the large coffers of the Library reflect the noble and, therefore, monumental dignity of books and scholarship.

The most striking feature of the new interior is the large, glazed window forming the north wall of the Drawing Room: a giant case-ment with bronze framework and astragals. The cast-bronze anthemion handles were modelled by Mr Eastland. The lower, clear, glazing gives a good axial view into the inner court. This major axis of the layout



↑ Fig 4 left: The Library, with pearwood bookcases designed by Mr Hamilton. The ceiling rosettes are derived from the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome. → Fig 5 right: The Elysian Fields, with its rectangular pond, pays homage to Schinkel and Perseus at Potsdam

is also continued southwards through glazed doors to a pedimented stone Doric doorway and a rectangular pond set in natural woodland. The upper panes of the window take the form of a frieze of stained-glass panels of the Muses, still being painted in the Pompeian manner by the architect's wife, Diana, and set in borders of yellow glass.

The unity of this room is enhanced by its collection of historic and modern furnishing. Among the specially commissioned pieces is a bench with ends in the form of bronze griffins, modelled by Steve Lane, and a large Klismos chair with the bronze Kerameikos bull for arms. The Dining Room is otherwise plainer, with a cylindrical ceramic stove set in an alcove, rather than a chimneypiece, and the doorcases and overdoors simply stencilled in a Grecian style, not moulded, rather in the manner of some Schinkel interiors.

The south elevation of the new wing (Fig 3) is of whitewashed rubble (by the contractor Chris James Masonry), with three large French windows in tapered ashlar stone surrounds framed with Grecian scrolls carved by Mr Lane. The source for tapered doorways of this type is ultimately the Erechtheion in Athens, but the more immediate inspiration is the Danish architect M. G. Bindsboll. This whole façade is a deliberate homage by the architect to his entrance front of the Thorwaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. It

overlooks a courtyard garden enclosed on the other three sides by high walls. This little garden has a strong Pompeii-Herculaneum atmosphere, thanks to new copies of bronze statues, including Apollo and Daphne, from museums in Naples, where casts are still made from the old neo-Classical moulds.

Against the outside courtyard wall is a Stoa with baseless Doric columns of the type favoured by 18th-century architects, from those in the Theatre of Marcellus in Rome. The Stoa overlooks the Elysian Fields or memorial grove, conceived as an integral part of the new building. A rectangular pond (Fig 5), fed by a natural spring, is set in a wild-flower lawn merging into native woodland. At the east end of the pond is a double pergola constructed of square Grecian pilasters, and on higher ground behind it is a version of the Stibadium by Ludwig Perseus containing a Neapolitan bronze cast of the *Praying Boy*, as in the garden at Glienicke at Potsdam.

These European Classical references, ancient and modern, are underlined by the fact that this designed landscape is a memorial grove in the manner of Widewell's evocative 18th-century park at Jaegerspris in Denmark. A simple stone *stеле* with a portrait medallion is dedicated to Schinkel under one of the ash trees on the lawn, and several others to Mr Hamilton's architectural mentors and inspirations are intended to follow.

