

Tenby Historical Society

DISCOVERING THE LOST STORY OF SION HOUSE – Part 1

The Familiar Tale

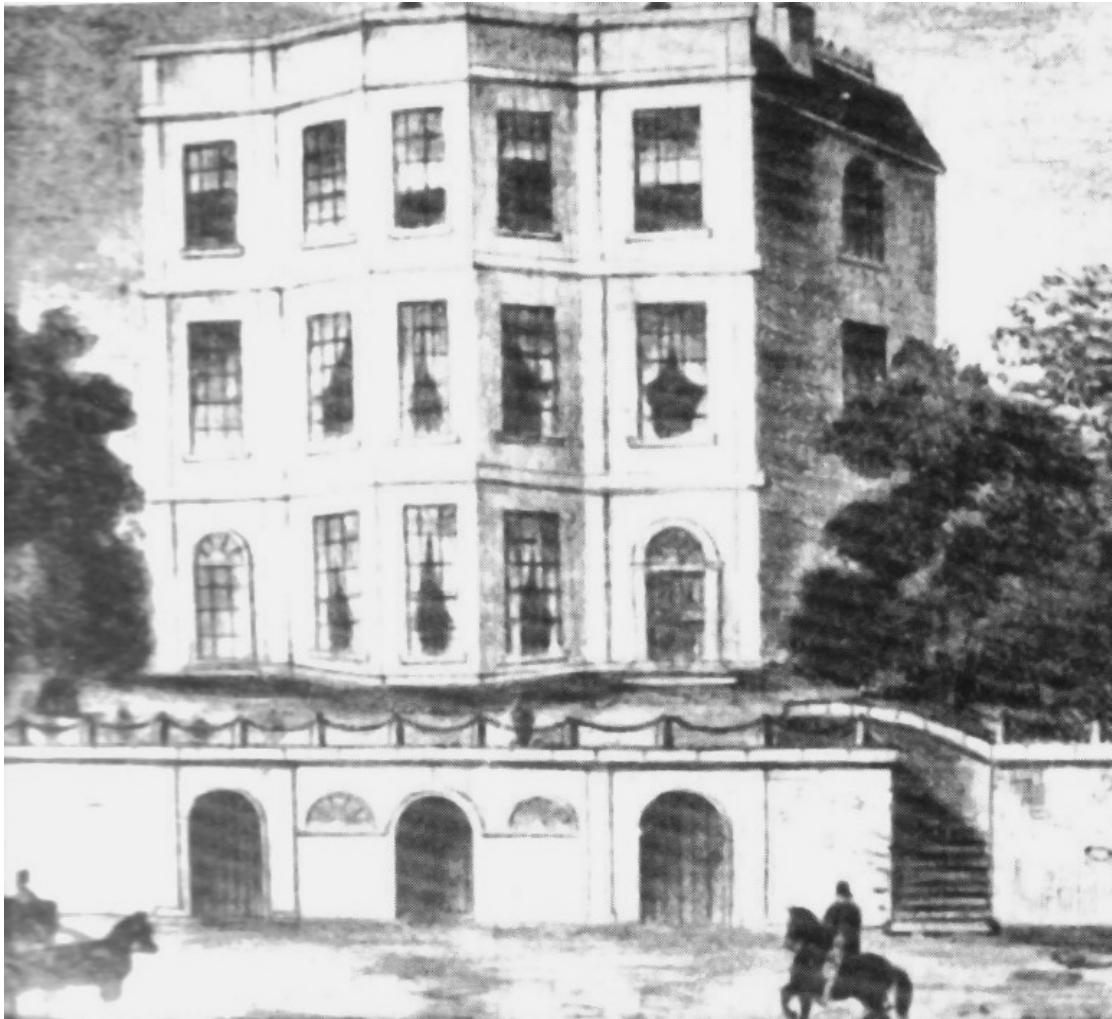
Sion House was once Tenby's finest house. Built in 1791 as a seaside home for William Routh, a Bristol printer, and his wife Catherine, Sion House was designed by John Nash who had retreated to Carmarthen to avoid his creditors. Nash established himself in Wales as a country house architect before returning to London and becoming the Prince Regent's favourite architect, designing Brighton Pavillion, London's Regent Street and Buckingham Palace. William Routh died in 1800 and Catherine in 1809. Sion house was then bought by Sir Henry Mannix, a magistrate from Cork who had settled in Pembrokeshire. Mannix died in 1822, leaving Sion House to his sons, William and Henry, the latter continuing to reside there. In 1839, following a successful legal challenge by William Richards, Mayor of Tenby, concerning the right of Henry Mannix the younger to use a carriageway to the house, Mannix challenged Richards to a duel. Richards was nearly killed in this, one of the last duels in Britain. In 1854 Richard Fothergill, an ironmaster, bought the house from the Mannix family, initially as a holiday home and subsequently enlarged it, tripling the original, and coming to live in Tenby. In 1919, Sion House, by then called Woofferton Grange, became a girl's boarding school. It burned down in 1938 and a block of flats, Croft Court now stands on the site.

This, in summary, is the familiar story of Sion House which will be recognised by all of those with an interest in Tenby's history. However, over the last few years there has been some original research which casts a fuller and intriguing light on the early story of Sion House and which raises new questions. In particular, it may have been at the centre of some questionable property dealings. Given the importance of Sion House as one of the first steps towards establishing Tenby as a fashionable holiday resort, it would be ironic if its building was the consequence of an attempted fraud.

In this paper I report upon recent research and in a follow-up piece, *The Lost Story of Sion House Part 2*, to float a hypothesis which endeavours to answer some of the outstanding questions.

The Missing Design

All books on Sion House, and all accounts of the life and works of John Nash show a familiar picture of the house. Architectural historians have commented that this is unlike any other Nash construction – which is not surprising since it now appears that this is not what Nash actually designed. Gary Davies of Kilgetty has conducted both documentary research and looked into the few remains on the site to identify the construction history of Sion House. He has concluded that the original design was much closer to that of Foley House in Haverfordwest and, indeed, of a number of other villas designed by Nash at that time.

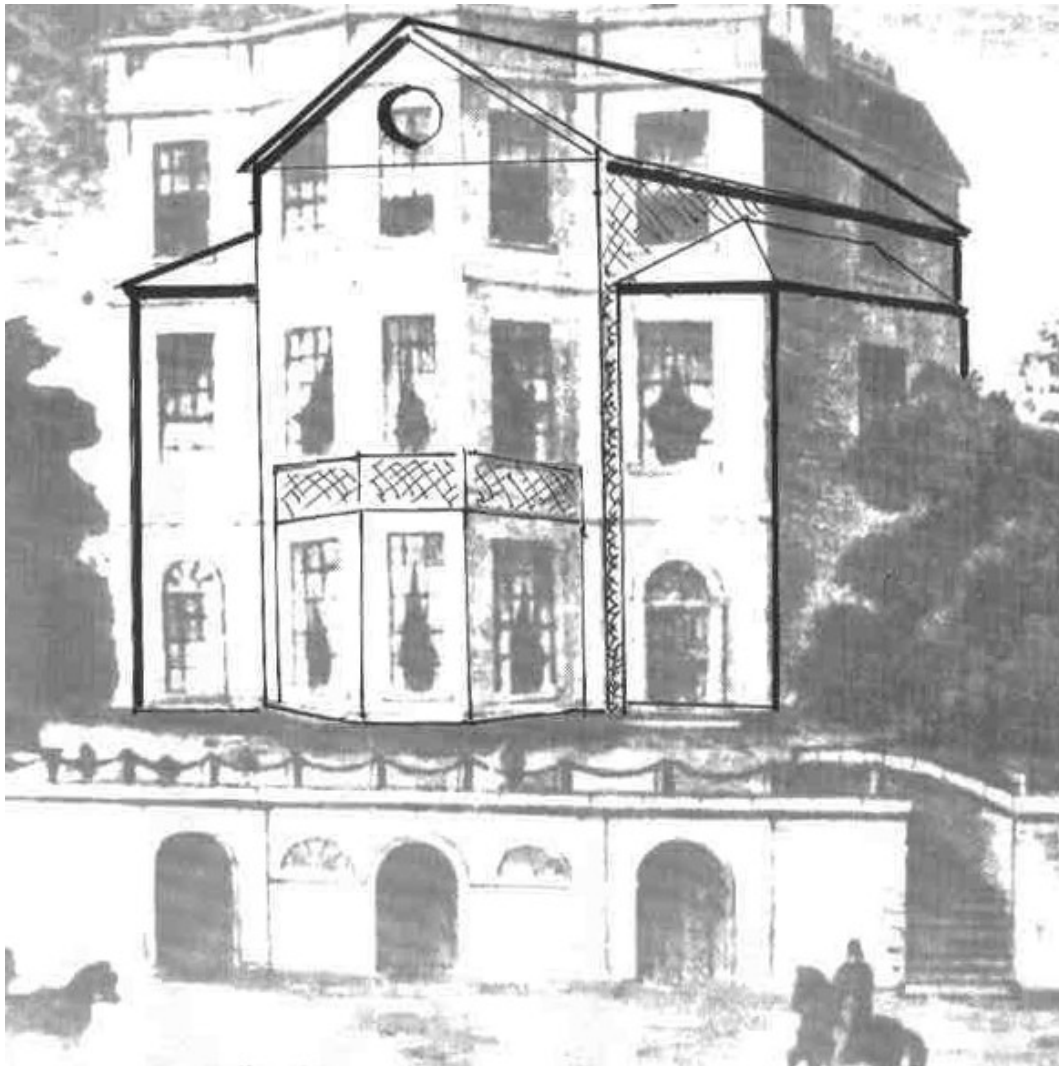


The picture of Sion House that we admire today is thought by Gary Davies to represent modifications undertaken on behalf of Henry Mannix, probably in the 1830s. Ironically, these modifications are likely to have been undertaken by a local builder without the benefit of architect. Where this research bears particularly upon the early history of the house is that the original does not appear to have been at all well constructed. For John Nash, style triumphed over substance but it is quite likely that Sion House was built by a local builder with little involvement from the architect, and built to a price, for within 20 years of being built the House was in a poor state. As will be seen, its deterioration and the need to arrest this became one of the factors in its subsequent history.



Foley House in Haverfordwest was designed by John Nash and built about 1790, the same time as Sion House.

A reconstruction - how John Nash designed it?



The Missing Fortune

The second piece of research was conducted by Stella Pedersen and published as part of a family history, *More about Maria's Family (2008)*. She is a direct descendant of Joseph Routh, a nephew of William Routh for whom Sion House was built. William left the whole of his estate to his wife, Catherine, but as they had no children, she left her estate – after various personal bequests – jointly between Joseph Routh and his sister Elizabeth. Yet they do not appear to have benefitted from the legacy and in trying to understand why, Stella and her husband Jørn came across the letters of Jacob Richards, a former mayor of Tenby, in the National Library of Wales. These revealed a strange tale which raised yet more questions.

When Catherine Routh died, her executor, the Haverfordwest solicitor, John Willy, put Sion House up for auction (November 1809) and the successful bidder was Jacob Richards who offered £1450. Jacob Richards was a Carmarthenshire man of humble stock who had joined the army of the Honorable East India Company, rising to Sergeant-Major. Tough and shrewd, he made a fortune in India and retired to Tenby in 1809. Richards has been described thus: “...*first elected Mayor in 1812 and served five times, the last occasion being in 1828. It is said of him that he was one of the most arrogant of men, overbearing and haughty, regarded by many as the uncrowned king in local and corporate affairs.*” Yet Jacob Richards was to meet his match in Sir Henry Mannix.

According to Richards, when Sion House first came on the market in 1809, Mannix called on him “*under an appearance of friendship*” and advised him not to bid too high. In the light of subsequent events one can speculate that even then Mannix was setting himself up to obtain the house on advantageous terms.

The sale did not go through and Willy put the house up for auction again in July 1810 and again Richards was the highest bidder, at £1400. Willy then wrote to Richards advising him that the title was not safe and he could not advise Richards to proceed until the “heir at law” (Catherine's next-of-kin), John Davies a mariner, had been traced. Richards expressed concern over the deteriorating condition of the house and in correspondence with both Willy and Joseph Routh offered to accept the deficient title in return for a reduction in the price or an indemnity from Routh. By January 1811, Richards was still pressing the issue and wrote to Willy “*Are you aware that the person of St Clears, Leonard, is the true Heir at Law if Davis was out of the way i.e. Dead without Children.*”

Only a few days later, Richards wrote to Joseph Routh: “*I was not a little surprised by the receipt of a letter from Mr Willy this evening stating that he had let the House to Sir H Mannix for 21 years. I understand from Sir H precisely that he is to pay £65 p.an and to keep the Premises in repair with an option to purchase at any time previous to the expiration of this period on your producing a title to his satisfaction.*” There followed a great deal of correspondence including threats of legal action and Richards asserting that he had bought the property and intended to have it. During all of this, Mannix put his men to work in the garden of Sion House and Richards brought in three constables to remove them; there were

to be other incidents. On March 10th 1811, Richards described one such in a letter to Routh: *“After I had been about an hour in the House Sir H Mannix and his people besieged me all round most completely, having got into the lower part of the House into the kitchen thro’ the arched Passage which I forgot to secure.....I left my servants in the upper part of the House with a Constable to keep the Peace & went for more assistance. While I was away one of his Servants got into the upper Storey by a Ladder thro’ the window, unbolted one of the Doors and let him and his people in.....,Mr Willy has since been here who declares he had authorized Sir Henry to take possession as a Tenant a Month ago.”* Although the blustering continued, Mannix had outwitted Richards and went on to purchase the house. Subsequent events showed that Richard's pride was very much hurt.

But what happened to the proceeds of the sale and what was the problem with the title that prevented Willy selling to Richards but was no problem for Mannix?

Stella Pedersen says that Catherine Davies' will was proved early in 1810 and made no explicit mention of the house (although on his death, William had left the whole of his property to her). The estate was valued at less than £300, which is easily accounted for by the personal possessions listed and includes nothing for Sion House. Joseph and Elizabeth Routh although the residual legatees, probably received nothing under the will. Stella quotes an 1811 letter of Jacob Richards to Joseph Routh: *“I really begin to think with you that this has been a pre-meditated conspiracy to deprive me of the House and you of the Sale.”*

The Duel

The third hero who has worked to uncover the full story is the late Brian Price. Born in Tenby, Brian Price lived and worked in London whilst making a significant contribution to the history of his home town. He published the story of the vendetta between the Richards and Mannix families which climaxed in the 1839 duel, and the story of the duel itself, in the *Journal of the Pembrokeshire Historical Society (No14, 2005)*. We are also indebted to Brian Price for a complete transcription of the Richards' letter book held by the National Library of Wales with copies of all of the letters sent by Richards from the middle of 1807 to 1833.

When Sion House was first built, inadequate arrangements were made for carriage access. William Routh obtained land adjoining his plot for a carriage drive from the Council (which was pleased to encourage a prestige development) for a peppercorn in the form of a “lease on three lives”, those of William Routh, Catherine Routh and Richard Humphries. It was a common practice at the time for the duration of a lease to be determined by the longest living of three named individuals. By 1823 all three had died but Henry Mannix, the illegitimate son of Sir Henry who had inherited Sion House, continued to use the strip of land and, in the normal course of events, it would have become his by adverse possession in 1843.

However, by 1835 William Richards, the son of Jacob, had succeeded to his estate, to the mayoralty and, it would seem, to the vendetta with the Mannix family. It may be because of his position as Mayor of Tenby that he became aware of the terms of the lease

and determined to use this weapon as a means of discomfiting Mannix. Richards claimed that Routh's lease had been subject to an older lease to his father, Jacob (even though Jacob had not come to Tenby until after the building of Sion House), and claimed the reversion following the death of the three named lives. The dispute went to the 1839 Pembrokeshire Lent Assizes which found for Richards. As Brian Price ably proved, it was a "stitch-up" involving forged documents and bribed jurymen. Mannix called Richards out although duelling was by this time illegal and both were County Magistrates. The encounter took place at Gumfreston and it was reported in the Carmarthen Journal: *"The Town of Tenby has been thrown into a state of melancholy excitement in consequence of a duel having taken place on Monday (1 April) between William Richards Esq, Mayor of that Town, and a gentleman of the name of Mannicks, which has terminated fatally, Mr Richards having received his antagonist's ball in the groin. We are informed the surgeons were unable to extract the bullet, and mortification speedily ensued"*.

In the event Richards survived to become Mayor on several more occasions, but he died without issue. Henry Mannix and his seconds immediately made good their escape to Ireland; Mannix never returned to England or Wales – where he would have been prosecuted.

Why Mannix?

The first question raised by the above is why Willy arranged for the sale of Sion House to Mannix when Richards appears to have been the first and largest bidder. Certainly, the approach of granting Mannix a repairing lease and option on the property whilst resolving the issue of the title was an ingenious way of preventing any further deterioration. On 14th August 1810 in a letter to Joseph Routh, Jacob Richards wrote: *"I should not in the least wonder to see the ceiling of the drawing Room tumble in from the lodgement of Water which has insinuated itself thro' the cracks of the Lead, and as I have no doubt seriously injured the beams."* In December he wrote: *"You no doubt know, it is now too much unroofed and the Rain has soaked into the lower Storey and seriously injured the intermediate woodwork."* Although Richards was putting pressure on Routh, he could not have done so without cause – urgent maintenance was, undoubtedly, required. But, if the lease were the right route, was it offered to Richards? Unfortunately we have only Richards' side of the correspondence but there is no letter referring to or rejecting an offer of a lease and Richards' expressed surprise at the arrangement with Mannix suggests that he had received no such offer.

To understand why Mannix may have received an offer that Richards did not, it is necessary to look more closely at Sir Henry Mannix himself. He was born at Richmond, County Cork in 1740. In 1778, when the United Irishmen started attacking the property of the protestant gentry, Mannix (in common with many of his peers) formed a regiment of militia, the Glanmire Union. Through this and as a magistrate, he became a scourge of the rebels. He received his baronetcy in 1787 and was presented to the Prince Regent when the latter visited Cork (he later claimed intimacy with the Prince but it appears that there was little foundation for this). Sir Henry Mannix was one of a number of individuals identified for

assassination by the Whiteboys, a particularly militant branch of the United Irishmen. In 1798 he was shot in the back by his gardener and initial reports suggested that he was dead, but Mannix recovered and retreated to Pembrokeshire, probably as a safe haven from which he could easily visit his properties in Ireland. Sir Henry had married Elizabeth Parker in Ireland in 1764 but they had no issue. He took a mistress, Mary Banks, and for the rest of his life ran two establishments. (whilst Lady Mannix reigned at Sion House, Mary was established at Eastwood, near Narberth, with her three children by Mannix).

In 1807 Henry Mannix was living in Market Street, Tenby (roughly on the present site of the Natwest Bank), next door to a mariner, Thomas Maddox. Maddox's property had a rear passageway to Cresswell Street and Mannix decided that he would like to use it (Murray John who owns 2 Olive Buildings in St Mary Street, believes that Olive Buildings were built for the use of Mannix's mistress, in which case Sir Henry may have wanted a more discreet means of visiting than via his front door). Mannix had his mason break through his garden wall into the passage and, quite reasonably, Maddox tried to stop him. This resulted in Mannix prosecuting Maddox for assaulting him and his mason and having Maddox imprisoned for two months. The following year Mannix was waiting with his carriage for the ferry to cross to Pembroke from Neyland when, he asserted, John Griffiths and David Noot pushed ahead of him. He prosecuted both for assault and had them put away for one month each.



From Couling 1811 map of Tenby showing the plots of Maddox and Mannix

Not to put too fine a point on it, Mannix was a bully. It may be concluded that his combination of legal training and forcefulness would make it quite in character for him to have browbeaten Willy into a course of action which resulted in him, Mannix, achieving his objective with respect to the purchase of Sion House. However, even that is unlikely to have succeeded unless Mannix knew something that could have embarrassed Willy and complicated the sale - did Mannix have knowledge of a problem with the title to Sion House that frustrated the sale to Richards?

The Missing Money

But what was this problem with the title and how did it bear on what Joseph and Elizabeth Routh did or did not receive under the will? A possible clue is in a transaction which Stella Pedersen had identified which took place in 1781, very shortly before William Routh married Catherine Davies in Bristol. All of William Routh's property was placed into a trust fund of which Catherine was the beneficiary and Michael Hodgson of London was the trustee. In the deed setting up the trust it was stated that after the death of Catherine the beneficiaries were to be her "heirs and assigns". Since the purpose of a trust is to put the property outside the control of the beneficiary, this must mean that the heir-at-law – John Davies and then "Leonard of St Clears" (Mary Davies, Catherine's aunt, had married Thomas Leonard in St Clears in 1746) - had a greater claim upon the proceeds of the sale of property contained in the trust than did Joseph and Elizabeth. As it happens, William Routh did not purchase the land upon which Sion House was built until 1784 but it would be reasonable to assume that property purchases made after the establishment of Catherine's trust were added to it. There is evidence in support of this in the modest value of Catherine's personal estate.

We do not know what the eventual outcome of the search for the heirs-at-law was and how the money paid by Mannix for Sion House was allocated. However, the existence of a trust provides an explanation for Joseph and Elizabeth Routh not benefiting from the sale of Sion House. It does not, however, provide a complete explanation for the problem with the title that prevented the sale to Richards in the first place, since the house could still have been sold - even if the heirs at law received the proceeds.

Stella Pedersen also points to the odd fact that as late as 1825 the four cottages in "No Acre" adjoining Sion House were still described as belonging to Catherine Routh's estate (these had been left by Catherine Routh to be sold and the interest on the proceeds given to four boys until the age of 18)., As these cottages, unlike Sion House, were explicitly mentioned in her will they must have belonged to her personally and not to her trust. There appears to be no obvious reason why her wishes were not promptly executed unless there was another and more fundamental problem with the title, possibly a problem that encompassed both Sion House itself and all other property on the same land.

Odder and Odder

The more one examines this tale, the stranger the circumstances seem to be. There appear to be several odd property transactions surrounding the Rouths which, to a layman, point to an attempt to obfuscate the true ownership of property, property belonging to one of the long-established families of Pembrokeshire – the Poyers of Grove. In a follow-up piece, *The Lost Story of Sion House Part 2*, I shall try to unravel some of these transactions and float a possible explanation.

Douglas Fraser 18 November 2013