

‘The Finest Cradle for Old Age’: Thomas Johnes’ Langstone Cliff Cottage, Devon

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Thomas Johnes Esq. of Hafod, Cardiganshire (Figure 1) and his second wife and cousin Jane, purchased Langstone Cliff Cottage near Dawlish, Devon (Figure 2) in 1813, but their change of abode from an extensive estate in the Welsh mountains near Aberystwyth to a Picturesque rustic cottage ornée in Devon can be attributed to a medley of significant events and lifestyle choices. This article examines Johnes’ motives for the abrupt move, and the improvements he made to his cottage by the sea. Although living in Devon in the winter months he still retained his Hafod home which had been designed in a flamboyant Gothic style (Figure 3). Johnes had developed the Hafod landscape in a fashionable Picturesque manner, hoping that the improvements on his estate showing the latest taste would encourage tourism to the region, providing work for the local population.¹ However, with rising debts through exorbitant spending, and increasing ill-health, Johnes bought Langstone Cliff Cottage as a recuperative sanctuary, to regain his strength whilst also reconciling his debts. His early life had been spent in the erudite pursuit of European art and literary scholarship, which he continued throughout his later life, collecting rare books and mediaeval manuscripts and studying land improvement to enhance both his estate and the lives of his tenants.

Figure 2. Detail from Langstone Cliffe Cottage, 1785 (unknown artist). Oil on canvas. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon



Figure 1. William Worthington (c.1795–c.1839), after Thomas Stothard (1755–1834), Thomas Johnes. Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin, The Bibliographical Decameron; or, Ten Days Pleasant Discourse upon Illuminated Manuscripts and Subjects Connected with Early Engraving, Typography, and Bibliography, 3 vols (London: 1817) III, p. 361



Figure 3. View of Hafod with Nash's octagonal library and the long conservatory. Richard Suggett, John Nash: Architect in Wales (Aberystwyth: Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 1995)

Early Life

Born in Ludlow, 20 August 1748, Johnes was educated at Eton where he studied Latin and Greek, and attended Edinburgh University between 1767 and 1768.² Travelling on a Grand Tour of Europe he visited France, Spain, Switzerland and Italy between 1768 and 1771, later resuming his university studies gaining an MA degree from Oxford in July 1783.³ Returning to Wales, Johnes became MP for Cardigan Boroughs between 1775 and 1780, and represented various Welsh constituencies until his death in 1816. Other civic honours awarded included Colonel of the Carmarthenshire militia, Lord Lieutenant of Cardiganshire, and in 1800, Fellow of the Royal Society.⁴

Johnes' first wife, Maria Burgh of Monmouth, died in 1782, and the following year he married his cousin Jane Johnes of Dolau Cothi, Carmarthenshire. That same year Johnes moved into the 13,000-acre Hafod Uchtryd estate, near Cwmystwyth, Cardiganshire, becoming a gentleman farmer and commencing the improvement of his estate in the Picturesque taste. Although a confirmed 'bibliophile' with a large collection of mediaeval French manuscripts and rare books valued at £20,000, his main occupation was the development of Hafod, experimenting with raising new breeds and varieties of sheep, cattle and crops.⁵ He was one of the founder members of the Cardiganshire Agricultural Society in 1784, and his dedication to tree planting on his estate was rewarded with gold medals from the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.⁶ Frognall Dibdin observes that:

Previous to 1783, when Mr. Johnes began to erect his first residence [at Hafod], the roads were impassable, there was not a post chaise in the county: the miserable huts of the peasantry he transformed into comfortable habitations, and he supplied medical attendants.⁷

Johnes also endeavoured to assist his tenants by awarding prizes for good husbandry in 1800 publishing *A Cardiganshire Landlord's Advice to his Tenants*, translated into Welsh by William Owen Pughe.⁸

The Picturesque Estate at Hafod, Cardiganshire

Johnes was one of the many young men of independent means who had journeyed on a European Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, but when overseas travel became excluded through wars and revolution, tourists began to explore the wilder areas of Britain, enthused by the theoretical debates which had surfaced on the Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Picturesque. Publications by theorists such as Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque*, Richard Payne Knight's *A Sketch, from the Landscape* and William Gilpin's *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* stimulated arguments which differentiated the Picturesque from the Sublime and the Beautiful, concepts which had been given theoretical significance in Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.⁹ However it was Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye and Several Parts of South Wales*, 1772, which coaxed travellers to consider 'the face of the country by the rules of picturesque beauty'. Gilpin later recommended that untamed areas of Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the Lake District should be viewed as pictorial landscapes.¹⁰ Payne Knight, one of the Picturesque ideologists, was Johnes' cousin so it was not

surprising that Johnes determined to improve Hafod in the Picturesque style, with Knight maintaining an interest in the developing landscape.

Demolishing the Elizabethan mansion which previously had been constructed on the site Johnes commissioned Thomas Baldwin of Bath to build a house in what Coflein describes as a 'fantasy Gothic style'.¹¹ The mansion, built by June 1786, was decorated with priceless works of art; the drawing room hung with Gobelin tapestries complemented by marble chimney-pieces and sculptures by Thomas Banks.¹² The house was later extended in 1794 by John Nash with an ornate octagonal library. Its domed roof, shaped like 'a flattened Moghul cap', emanated natural light, the roof supported by sixteen variegated marble Doric columns.¹³ Nash linked the library to a 160 foot long conservatory with a central walkway, which housed valuable and rare exotic plants, the doors 'panelled with plate-glass' reflecting the conservatory, giving an illusion of an even longer length.¹⁴ A similar design using mirrored corridors was used by Humphry Repton, Nash's one-time partner, in his 1808 unexecuted designs for Brighton Pavilion.¹⁵

From the end of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century 'bibliomania', a 'passion for the acquisition and display of books', was rife within the upper classes, resulting in ancient texts changing hands with an exorbitant price tag. The collectors gained social status by constructing elaborate country house libraries to fully display their acquisitions to fellow bibliophiles, family and friends.¹⁶ At Hafod, Johnes erected his library to house his vast collection of rare books, Welsh mediaeval manuscripts, and French chronicles of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ In 1809 Dibdin, author of *Bibliomania – or Book Madness*, referred to Johnes as a 'high mettled bibliomaniac' as Johnes spent a large proportion of his life and fortune on buying books and manuscripts, and corresponding with other collectors of books and art including Sir James Edward Smith and an old university friend George Cumberland.¹⁸ Johnes became an accomplished translator of mediaeval texts including *The Travels of Brocquiere* and the *Chronicles of Froissart*, some printed using his own Hafod press.¹⁹

Dibdin described Johnes' passions for collecting and land improvements as having a love of 'Books, of pictures, of architecture, of grotts, water-falls, and rivers, and of all the grand and soul-reviving features of mountainous landscape!'²⁰ Magnificent gardens had been laid out around the Hafod mansion and Johnes' programme of land improvement included planting two million and sixty-five thousand trees between October 1795 and April 1801, with one million two hundred thousand larches, the other trees being alder, oak, elm, beech, birch, ash and mountain ash.²¹ J T Barber viewed the landscape in 1803:

An assemblage of beauties, of cheerful walks and silent glens, of woody precipices, shadowy glades, garden thickets and waterfalls, that considering the barren wilds of the surrounding country, it seemed like a second Paradise rising from a newly-subsided chaos (Figure 4).²²

Johnes' wife Jane, and Mariamne, their daughter, constructed more modest gardens in the landscape alongside the improvements. Jane Johnes' large walled garden was situated



Figure 4. *The Picturesque landscape at Hafod, 2013.*
 Photo: author



Figure 5. *Entrance Gate to Mrs Johnes' Garden, 2013.*
 Photo: author

near the river Ystwyth with two gateways known as Adam and Eve, which were decorated with Coade stone keystones (Figure 5).²³ Open to the public her garden was described as:

A gaudy flower garden, with its wreathing and fragrant plats bordered by shaven turf, with a smooth gravel walk carried round, is dropped, like an ornamental gem, among wild and towering rocks, in the very heart of boundless woods ... The spot at present contains about two acres ... teeming with every variety of shrub or flower.²⁴

Benjamin Heath Malkin reports that her garden had not reached the peak of its perfection, as a Doric temple 'from a design in Stuart's Athens' was still to be constructed in the garden. However, he commented that Mariamne had developed a more experimental garden in the 'pensile manner', hidden away, high up on the wooded mountains:

There is another flower garden ... still more singularly situated, to which strangers are never admitted ... so carefully sheltered and judiciously disposed, as to realise a paradise in the wilderness. The taste in which it is laid out ... exhibits in a nursed state many of the curious plants, which are the natural growth of high exposures in foreign climates.²⁵

Although Johnes' life appeared a rural idyll, difficulties began to arise. By 1800 he began to have serious financial worries due to much overspending on the construction of his house and estate, resulting in the sale of his English properties including Croft Castle, Herefordshire; Stanage Park, Powys, together with large areas of inherited Welsh land.²⁶ Also, while Johnes was away on parliamentary duties, disaster struck Hafod on 13 March 1807 with the breakout of a major fire which damaged both the mansion and Johnes' beloved library. Jane Johnes salvaged many of the precious books and manuscripts, but the house was reduced to an empty shell. Johnes returned three days later to view the ruins, stating that he would rebuild again: 'I must renew the fable of the Phoenix', but although the mansion was insured for £30,000 it was estimated that Johnes had lost £70,000 by the fire.²⁷ Baldwin was again commissioned to re-design the interior of the mansion and library within the ruined walls. To pay for the cost of rebuilding and to offset some of his debts, Johnes gradually began to sell timber from the Hafod estate, a great sacrifice.²⁸ During the restoration works he and his wife and daughter lived for three years at Castle Hill, near Aberystwyth, returning in 1810 to the Hafod estate.

Although Johnes' first marriage was childless, of his children born to Jane Johnes, a son died in infancy and his daughter Mariamne, whom he believed would carry on his estate improvements, died, unmarried, in London in 1811. The sudden death of his daughter caused Johnes' health to fail, the duality of circumstances influencing his decisions for the management of the Hafod estate. In 1813 he became extremely ill after a cold which intensified and was diagnosed as 'water on the chest', the decline in his health so rapid that it appeared life-threatening.²⁹ With Hafod snowbound for many weeks, his doctor in Wales suggested that convalescence during the winter months away from the 'keen and bleak air of his native mountains' might prove helpful, so the recovering Johnes took his advice and investigated the situation of Langstone Cliff Cottage, a property on the coast near Dawlish, Devon.³⁰

Langstone Cliff Cottage

It is likely that Johnes researched the best place to settle on the south coast while he recuperated at Weymouth in the summer of 1813. In October that year he wrote to Sir James Edward Smith that his excursion down to Weymouth had been useful in deciding to spend the springtime in Devon, but found to his disappointment that the Devonshire coast's eastern shores became too cold at that season.³¹ Perhaps Johnes took guidance from texts similar to Thomas Shapter's *The Climate of the South of Devon*, which suggested the temperature of the Dawlish area was more suitable for recuperation from illness than further along the coast:

The climate of Dawlish is warmer than that of Exeter, and even, perhaps, that of Torquay. During the autumn and winter months there can be no place on this coast better adapted as a residence for those suffering under pulmonary disease, so entirely is it protected from the prevailing winds of these seasons.³²

Keen to take the advice of his doctor, and perhaps also looking for a property to fit in with his Picturesque taste, it was providential for Johnes that the sixty-two acre Langstone Cliff Cottage came onto the property market. Larger than

its name suggests, advertisements for the sale announced that the house, a detached rustic cottage ornée, could accommodate a family of distinction:

A suite of three rooms nearly 30 feet each long, communicating by folding doors ... entrance hall, study, &c, finished with Gothic windows to the floors, opening to the lawn, twelve bedrooms, three dressing-rooms, appropriate servants offices, double coach-house, two stables, with seven stalls in a yard.³³

Four or five acres of plantations provided shelter for the house and the ‘excellent kitchen-garden, fully stocked, cropped and planted with choice fruit trees’, gave scope for improvement.³⁴ An expansive lawn led to a fine beach, and there were extensive walks with views across the Exe and the surrounding Devon coast. The cottage’s situation was emphasised in advertisements as being suitable for those who ‘required a mild climate’, so it was an ideal purchase for Johnes.³⁵ In 1814 he described the property to his friend Cumberland:

I bought last year a most beautiful Cottage not far from Dawlish ... whither we are going about this day week for the more perfect restoration of my health. I purchased it with the intent of passing the spring months there, but I shall now perhaps spend the Winter ones too there, always coming hither [Hafod] for those of Summer & Autumn.³⁶



Figure 6. Langstone Cliff Cottage, 1785 (artist unknown) Oil on canvas. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon

Langstone Cliff Cottage was built in the fashionable Gothic style, its nine arched windows and two bays overlooking the secluded beach (Figure 2). The architecture of such cottages was given prominence in John Plaw’s *Ferme Ornée; or Rural Improvements*, 1795, and, as Gothic windows featured in many of the plans, they began to appear in the design of cottage ornées.³⁷ When Langstone Cliff Cottage was first built, pre-1785 (Figure 6), it was probably a small rustic bathing cottage similar to the Hook Summer House, in Hampshire, which was also in an isolated position near a beach, with a long walk or carriage drive back to the main mansion, Hook House.³⁸ That the Exe estuary (Figure 7) was a prime location for cottage ornées is suggested by David Maudlin, with the area made popular by ‘the curative quality of the maritime climate and the fashion for sea-bathing’.³⁹ The construction of these decorative properties became attractive to Regency landowners to enjoy private social gatherings and tea-drinking parties secluded in the landscape.⁴⁰ The most likely nearby demesne to Langstone Cliff was Warren House, the 1888 25-inch OS Map (see Figure 11) showing a path connecting the two buildings. Therapeutic sea-water bathing had been advocated by Dr. Richard Russell, whose treatise *A Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands* was published in 1752, after which sea-bathing became fashionable all along the south coast, and in other British seaside resorts.⁴¹ Dawlish became well-known at the end of the eighteenth century as a ‘bathing village’, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* describing the resort in 1793 as a place ‘where summer lingers and spring pays her earliest visits’ (Figure 8).⁴² The antiquarian, historian and topographer John Swete built a Gothic early cottage ornée summer house at



Figure 8. John Thomas (fl. 1830–1835), after Thomas Allom (1804–1872), The Baths on the Beach, Dawlish, Devonshire. Steel line engraving, coloured, on paper. Produced for the series ‘Devonshire Illustrated’ by Fisher, Son & Co., 1831



Figure 7. William Dawson (1759–1834), Across the Warren to Langstone Sands; View South of the Line, 1848. The view from the red Langstone cliffs across to Exmouth would have been similar in 1814, but with fewer Regency villas on the hillside. Lithograph from a series of views of Brunel’s ‘Atmospheric Railway’ in the Dawlish area. Image courtesy of the Institution of Civil Engineers



Figure 9. John Swete's early Gothic summer house at Oxton. Plate I, *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol 74 (1793), p. 593

Oxton House, near Haldon, Devon (Figure 9), and described the gradual build-up of Regency architecture in the town 'on the cliffs and over the Strand edifices of superior taste and higher expense crowd together'.⁴³

While engaged in the purchase of Langstone Cliff Cottage Johnes began to look at his financial affairs, selling the reversion of the Hafod estate but remaining as a life tenant, the contents of the estate to be sold after his death. After the demise of his daughter he had no close relatives, so after his death he planned that his wife would be debt free.⁴⁴



Figure 10. William Stanley (Draughtsman), *Ordnance Survey Drawings: Exmouth showing Wick [Week]*, 3 inches to 1 mile, Maps OSD 39/16, 1801. Pen and ink on paper. British Library Board

In September that year Johnes was again seriously unwell at Hafod, not recovering until January 1815, after which he hoped to visit his 'new purchase in Devon' but was understandably cautious in making firm plans due to his poor health. He described the site of his new cottage to Smith: 'It is a most beautiful situation and if you look into Donn's Map of Devonshire you will see nearly opposite to Exmouth a house called Wick, which seems to be the spot though now called

Langstone Cliff Cottage' (Figure 10).⁴⁵ The house was built on a strip of river gravel laid down by the river Exe, but overlain with red sands in the Permian period, giving the area of the cottage its distinctive red sandy beaches, and rocky cliffs.⁴⁶

Full of enthusiasm Johnes made plans for the extension of the property and for the construction of a garden, the *Annual Biography* for 1817 reporting that it was 'another creation ... of a different kind indeed from that at Hafod; but the novelty of the sea, of the fine verdure, of the scenery, and above all, of the balmy air, made him [Johnes] delight in a small but elegant cottage'.⁴⁷ Visiting Langstone Cliff in May 1815 Johnes wrote to Cumberland:

I am more & more delighted with this place. It is the finest cradle for old age imaginable and every thing is so much under one's hand, it is quite comfortable. I am busily employed in walling my kitchen garden which will be an excellent one. All the rest is a kind of flower garden, which we shall yearly improve.⁴⁸

From this letter it appears that Johnes was already making improvements to his new cottage and to the kitchen garden. It was probably Jane Johnes who designed the small-scale garden, and in similar fashion to her large plot at Hafod filled it with flowers and shrubs. Some of the planting outlined on the 1888 OS Map (Figure 11) possibly originated from the time of Johnes' occupancy of the cottage, with large numbers of trees planted interspersed with woodland walks. One of their close neighbours was Henry Drury, a collector and bibliophile whom Johnes had known for some years, so it is possible that even in Devon Johnes was engaged in either book-collecting or continuing with his translations.⁴⁹ The change of scenery and sea air, and the new activities at Langstone appeared to have helped Johnes back to full fitness:

This fair air & fine food has quite made me well again, and I shall ever feel grateful for it. It is really the nicest cradle for old age I ever saw and we shall return again the first week of October & probably pass the winter here.⁵⁰

Leaving Langstone in June 1815 and back at Hafod for three months of summer, Johnes saw that many changes had taken place on the estate in his absence with trees felled and empty library shelves where books had been sold.⁵¹ Eager to return to Langstone, Eliza Johnes, Johnes' sister-in-law accompanied the couple back to Dawlish for the autumn, thinking that their Devon abode would be a small cottage, but found a 'handsome house, elegantly furnished'.⁵² However, the winter climate at Dawlish proved to be just as poor as in Wales, the weather particularly detrimental to Johnes' respiratory complaint.⁵³ In February 1816 he corresponded with Smith again:

We have been here since November and I am but just recovered from a most severe cough & inflammation on the Lungs. I am satisfied it was the same complaint I had last year, which that scoundrel W. Williams wilfully mistook and mistreated. But having at Dawlish as able as honest a practitioner, I escaped with only three weeks confinement & I think I am in better health than for many months' past.⁵⁴



Figure 11. Ordnance Survey Map 25-inch 1890, Devonshire Sheet CII.SE

is cannot mix much in society, but I find amusements in my books and plants.⁵⁸ Since the death of Johnes the Hafod mansion had been closed up, forlorn and uninhabited. The Hafod estate remained in Chancery for many years, but in September 1832 it was sold complete with contents by the Court of Chancery at the London Auction Mart.⁵⁹ Henry, fourth Duke of Newcastle bought the estate for £62,038 and took possession a year later, only a short while before Jane Johnes died in Exeter in 1833.⁶⁰

In the next decade great changes came to the Devonshire south coast near Langstone Cliff when Isambard Kingdom Brunel's 'Atmospheric Railway' was constructed through the sandstone cliffs at Dawlish (Figure 12).⁶¹ It was part of an experimental line of the Great Western Railway system which opened in 1846 from Exeter to Newton Abbot via Dawlish. Brunel's system, which required no locomotive and produced no smoke or dust, was ideal for the Devon resorts which promoted the health benefits of their clean air and sandy beaches. Running to a timetable in 1848, the system worked well in the warmer months but was unreliable in frosty weather or winter high tides. Nonetheless, the excavation of the red sandstone cliffs was a great engineering achievement, but as the line ran close to the beach (see Figure 11) it was susceptible to storm damage, so the experiment was ultimately abandoned, and the line converted to locomotive power.⁶²

At some point in its history, likely at the end of the nineteenth century, Langstone Cliff Cottage was furnished with a cast-iron columned verandah with a filigree cast-iron lace canopy and glass roof. The design has echoes of the work of Charles D. Young and Co. of Edinburgh



Figure 12. William Dawson (1759–1834), From the Kennaway Tunnel to the Parson Tunnel Dawlish: View South of the Line, 1848. Lithograph from a series of views of Brunel's 'Atmospheric Railway' in the Dawlish area. Image courtesy of the Institution of Civil Engineers

However, when Spring came Johnes became seriously ill for the last time, dying on 23 April 1816 at sixty-seven years of age.⁵⁵ He was buried, not in Devon, but on the estate at Hafod in Eglwys Newydd, the church designed by James Wyatt, which Johnes had commissioned in 1803, and where his daughter Mariamne was buried. A memorial in the church to Mariamne was sculpted by Francis Chantrey in 1812 but work for the monument remained unpaid on Johnes' death, the memorial only erected in the church after the debt was funded in 1835 by the Duke of Newcastle via the Court of Chancery.⁵⁶

Jane Johnes went back to Devon and never visited the Hafod estate or Wales again.⁵⁷ She lived at Langstone Cliff Cottage for a few years, later moving to a smaller house in Exeter, keeping exquisite items from Hafod which were displayed in her rooms. Still keen on botany, she belonged to the Exeter Botanical Society, but lived quietly: 'A heart as torn as mine



Figure 13. Postcard of the Langstone Cliff Hotel showing the large extension to the rear of the cottage. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon



Figure 14. View of the Langstone Cliff Hotel in the mid-1960s. Extensions have been added to the original building, but the structure of the cottage is still intact with its glass roofed verandah. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon

and Glasgow which was extremely fashionable for the 1880s Victorian Lace cast-iron buildings of Australia and America.⁶³ The cottage, complete with its Victorian verandah, survived through several ownerships until the mid-twentieth century when in May 1946 Stanley Rogers attended an auction a day early. Instead of buying furniture, he bought what was then known as the Langstone Cliff House, Dawlish Warren, for £4,500, but missed a furniture sale the next day, which offered a large amount of oil and watercolour paintings, statues, Chippendale, Sheraton and Hepplewhite furniture, books, china and carpets, perhaps some from the time of the Johnes' occupation of the cottage.⁶⁴ These would have been useful to help re-furnish the house, but Rogers could not attend that day as his wife Marjorie required hospital attendance. Despite that small difficulty, on 30 March 1947 the Langstone Cliff Hotel opened for guests, and from that time to the present, Langstone Cliff Cottage became the Langstone Cliff Hotel, which has been owned, managed, and extended by the family of Stanley and Marjorie Rogers.

At first the hotel was situated in the original expanded cottage ornée, with its Gothic windows and two bays still intact (Figure 13), but it has since been incorporated into a modern building with various renovations and wings added (Figures 14, 15). However, even today, the essence of the Regency cottage ornée can still be observed within the building, its Gothic architecture surrounded, but not



Figure 15. The Langstone Cliff Hotel, 1970s. An additional wing has been added to the hotel. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon



Figure 16. The 'Verandah', at the Langstone Cliff Hotel, 2013. Photo: author



Figure 17. The view down to the sea from the 'verandah' at the Langstone Cliff Hotel, 2019. With kind permission from the Langstone Cliff Hotel, Dawlish, Devon

diminished (Figure 16). Its elevated position on the red sandstone cliffs overlooking the sea towards Exmouth, gives a view which has endured from the time when Thomas Johnes was the owner of Langstone Cliff Cottage (Figure 17) to the present day.

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