

NOTES ON PENLEE HOUSE, PENZANCE

by P.A.S. Pool, F.S.A.

Penlee House was built in the 1860s by John Richards Branwell (1824 - 1902), the eldest son of Robert Branwell (died 1860) and his wife Mary Richards. Robert was the son of the founder of the family flour milling business, Robert Mathews Branwell the elder, who was first cousin to Maria Branwell (1783 - 1821), the wife of Patrick Bronte and mother of Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell Bronte. The Branwells of Penzance were builders, grocers and general merchants, but in 1807 they acquired Vellanhoggan Mills at Gulval and thereafter the flour business of R.M. Branwell & Sons, of which J.R. Branwell was for many years the head, provided the main basis of their prosperity.

J.R. Branwell's father Robert was Mayor of Penzance in 1850, and he himself held that office three times, in 1865, 1868 and 1871. In 1860 he began a long series of purchases of land on the western outskirts of Penzance, intended to provide a site for his new house and a large park surrounding it. The first purchase was of the Lower Morrab Fields, which he bought in 1860 from William Edward Eddison of London, whose father John Eddison (builder of the nearby Redinnick House in about 1815) had bought them from John Cornish in 1825. In 1863 J.R. Branwell bought part of fields called Park Collins from Samuel Borlase of Castle Horneck, in 1867 the remaining part from Samuel's son John Borlase, and in 1874 fields called the Minney Land (formerly Maddern's Meadow or Nenny's Land) from John Batten. In 1879 and 1880 he bought small additional areas from Christopher Hawkins of Trewithen, in 1899 more land at the Minney from the Liquidator of Batten Carne & Carne's Bank, and finally in 1902, the year of his death, the four southernmost houses in Wellington Terrace from the Executors of Mrs. Ellen Bradley Boase.

It is not known in what year Penlee House was built, but as it is not listed in Coulson's Penzance Directory, published in 1864, it very probably dates from the middle or late 1860s. The Post Office Directory of 1873 lists J.R. Branwell as living at Penlee. None of the fields and other properties which he bought had previously been called Penlee, and it seems probable that the name for his new house was chosen because of the distant view of Penlee Point.

The privacy of the house, which had been built very close to the eastern boundary of J.R. Branwell's property, was seriously threatened by the development in the 1880s of Morrab Road, and in 1890 he obtained from the developer, Charles Campbell Ross the banker, a lease for 700 years of a plot giving a frontage of 109 feet to the road.

John Richards Branwell died on 26 November 1902, and the family business did not long survive him, the mills at Gulval being closed in 1903. He and his wife, Elizabeth Philippa Tyack, had two sons, John and Alfred, and three daughters, Laura (Mrs. Thomas), Edith Elizabeth, and Marion (Mrs. Mudge). By his will he left Penlee to his unmarried daughter Edith for her life, then to his younger son Alfred. Edith died in 1918, and Alfred, who had lived at Trevean House in Alverton, moved into Penlee.

Alfred Branwell continued his father's policy of land purchases, but on a more modest scale. In 1916 he bought a garden adjoining Trevean from the Executors of Charles Pidwell, and in 1930 a field at Alverne Meadows from William and Mary Spargo; in the latter year he also secured the freehold of the plot fronting Morrab Road. He died on 11 December 1939 and his wife Isabel (nee Dennis) in 1940. Their only son, John Edward Tyack Branwell, had died young, and Penlee passed to their two daughters, Mrs. Vera Primrose Hancock of Flushing, Falmouth, and Mrs. Sybil Margaret Ferguson of Belfast. In 1942 they sold the part of the property south of the Redinnick footpath, now a housing development called Penlee Manor Drive. On 29 December 1945 they contracted to sell Penlee House and Park, comprising all the remaining property bought by their grandfather and father, to Penzance Borough Council for £13,000, and the sale was completed on 1 July 1946. The property has since remained in public ownership, except for the houses in Wellington Terrace which were later sold.

The older Redinnick House, adjoining Penlee, also belonged to the Branwell family for much the same period, being bought by J.R. Branwell's brother, Robert Mathews Branwell the younger, in 1873, and sold by his grand-daughter, Miss Frances Cathrina Branwell, in 1942.

I record my thanks to the Town Clerk of Penzance, Mr. J.A. Wilson, for access to the deeds of Penlee House.