

the professorial practitioner

Too many people assume that one of the most inspirational figures in twentieth-century Welsh architecture, Dewi-Prys Thomas, was just the renowned head of the Welsh School of Architecture. In this year's centenary of his birth, *Jonathan Vining* sets the record straight presenting some of the architectural high points from Dewi's unpublished archive of projects.

Dewi-Prys Thomas
05.08.1916 – 28.11.1985

5 August 2016 marks the centenary of the birth of one of the greatest figures in twentieth-century Welsh architecture. Best remembered as a charismatic and inspirational teacher and lecturer, Dewi-Prys Thomas (D-PT) was also a brilliant academic, Welsh nationalist, pacifist and, at various times, a book illustrator, political cartoonist and an actor on both radio and the amateur stage. He is perhaps less well known for the buildings that he designed, although two houses of his are now listed and the merits of one in particular, Cedarwood, have been championed in recent years by the Twentieth Century Society.

D-PT was most active in practice in the 1950s during his tenure as a lecturer at Liverpool School of Architecture when he carried out a wide range of projects, sometimes in collaboration with other architects including Gerald R Beech a fellow lecturer at the Liverpool School. However, when he became head of the Welsh School of Architecture in 1960 he knowingly gave up the opportunity to build his own buildings in favour of his real destiny of being able to train the architects of the Wales of the future.

D-PT's great friend, Wyn Thomas, has spoken of the danger that because too few of his buildings have been realised he might be remembered more as a visualiser than a practical architect, but:



'he was a practical architect, and those who worked with him will remember that Dewi really knew his building construction ... His working drawings were as much a work of art as his sketch designs ... He used the axonometric a lot in his working drawings, and his specification writing was lucid and thorough ... Good draughtsmanship was important. Drawing well was a matter of integrity.'¹

Despite the pressures of his elevation to a chair in 1964, for much of the time that he was head of the Welsh School of Architecture, and after his retirement in 1981, D-PT was retained as a consultant by H M R Burgess + Partners and, from 1974 until his death, by Wyn Thomas + Partners. During the latter period he designed several schemes, mostly unexecuted, ranging across a number of building types, all sited in sensitive environments. These included a barn conversion at St Nicholas (1976); flats facing The Green, Llandaf (c 1978); an extension to the Graham Sutherland Gallery, Picton Castle (1980); and three office schemes in Cardiff conservation areas (1978-80); culminating in the building for which he is best known, Pencadlys Gwynedd, Caernarfon (1982-84), for which D-PT provided the elevational and townscape treatment (see p.13).



Top: Dewi-Prys Thomas, c1970

Above left: Harlech Castle ink drawing, 1933, shows D-PT's prodigious artistic gifts were evident in his teens (with permission of Alwyn Evans and Meleri Mair).

Liverpool School of Architecture projects:

Above right: Concert enclosure, Otterspool, Honan Travelling Scholarship, 1939

Far left: Bridge connecting two counties, 1935

Left: Axonometric of senate house and convocation hall for the University of Liverpool, thesis design, 1938



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1 Dr Williams' School, Dolgellau, which opened in 1878, was a pioneer in Wales of secondary education for girls. It became a boarding school following the Education Act, 1944 and, in 1952, D-PT designed a three-storey, linear building built into the terraced site containing enfiladed dormitories with, at the west end, a more complex and visually prominent element housing staff rooms and staff common room. It's unfortunate that the dormitory block was only taken to tender stage as it would have been a fine building of its period. The school closed in 1975 and the site is now part of Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor ².

2 The Oschinsky house, Birkenland, is a modest, two-storey house built in 1957 on a site at Bidston, Birkenhead that was part of a Victorian mansion destroyed during the second world war. The compelling parti for the design is the interaction of two overlapping rectangular volumes and the cross axis formed where they intersect. The relationship to the sloping site is skilfully resolved with entry from the roadside plateau across a bridge to the living accommodation on the upper level, exploiting the views westwards towards the Glyders in distant Snowdonia ³.

3 Entwood in the Birkenhead suburb of Prenton was a private house designed for Professor J Banks and completed in 1959. It takes the novel form of a linked group of square blocks, each with a shallow-pitched quarter-pyramidal roof, arranged on a pinwheel plan around a paved entrance courtyard. The overall composition is picturesque, with the white-painted rendered walls suggesting vernacular influences. Entwood was listed grade II in 1998 ⁴.

4 In 1960, the year that D-PT became head of the Welsh School of Architecture, he designed the telecommunications suite in the Shell Centre, which was in the process of being built as the central offices in London of the Royal Dutch/Shell group of companies by the architects Easton & Robertson, Cusdin, Preston and Smith. It was a complex commission and a sophisticated interior design of its period ⁵.

5 Cedarwood, in the leafy Liverpool suburb of Woolton, was designed in collaboration with Gerald R Beech as the Women's Journal House of the Year and, reputedly, was visited by 66,000 people in the spring of 1960. It has a masonry ground floor with an oversailing timber framed first floor and 'encapsulated the best in contemporary design, with an emphasis on modular planning and flexible living spaces.' ⁶ The house was listed grade II* in 2007 and has been extensively published in recent years by Historic England and the Twentieth Century Society.

6 The Friends' Meeting House at Heswall (1961-62), by D-PT and Gerald R Beech, is a multifaceted work of architecture derived from the nature of the site and early church precedents, while containing many religious and Biblical references and allusions. Access to the brightly day-lit first floor meeting room is via an apse-shaped projecting oriel window with narrowly spaced mullions – the yellow-tinted glass of which gives a warm, suffuse light – and a ramped staircase rising between solid walls. The building has a powerful simplicity of form and uses a limited palette of materials with immaculate detailing. Regrettably, changes have been made to the building over time that have diminished the architects' original intentions ⁷.

7 Capel Seilo in Aberystwyth was originally built in 1863 but suffered continual problems through being built with inadequate foundations on marshy ground. The front wall had already been rebuilt once or twice before D-PT in collaboration with local architect R Emrys Bonsall added a modern, lightweight timber portico in 1962-63. Unfortunately, the chapel no longer exists having been demolished in 1995 ⁸.



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8 The modern extension to the rear of 22 Cathedral Road, Cardiff by Wyn Thomas + Partners (c 1979) was conceived as two visually discrete elements: one a transverse linear block with a slated, mono-pitched roof; and the other a square office pavilion with a shallow pyramidal roof. Although not constructed entirely to the original design, and lacking some refinement in execution, the extension with its oriel window facing Cathedral Road along the axis of the driveway has a dignified and urbane presence.

Dewi Prys Thomas

- 1 THOMAS, Wyn. Address given by Wyn Thomas on the occasion of the unveiling of the Dewi-Prys Thomas commemorative plaque, Pencadlys Gwynedd, Caernarfon, 28 November 1987 (unpublished).
- 2 NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES. Dr Williams School, Dolgellau, Records, undated [online]. Archives Wales. Available from: http://www.archiveswales.org.uk/anw/get_collection.php?inst_id=38&coll_id=3154&expand= [accessed 12 March 2016].
- 3 ABBOTT, Derek and POLLIT, Kimball. Hill Housing: A Comparative Study. Granada Publishing, St Albans, 1980, pp70-74.
- 4 HARWOOD, Elaine and DAVIES, James O. England's Post-War Listed Buildings. Batsford, London, 2015, p46.
- 5 THOMAS, D E Wyn, 'Architecture is not an addendum...'. In: Year Book 3, Society of Architects in Wales, 1982, p53.
- 6 HARWOOD, Elaine and DAVIES, James O. Op cit, p51.
- 7 PEVSNER, Nikolaus and HUBBARD, Edward. The Buildings of England: Cheshire. Yale University Press, London, 2003, p237.
- 8 OWEN, D Huw. The Chapels of Wales. Seren Books, Bridgend, 2012, p134.

Jonathan Vining is a trustee of The Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust: www.dewi-prysthomas.org
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