



Birch Thompson Memorial Fund

11 Swan Close,
Stafford, Staffordshire, ST16 1AU
www.gelliwig.org.uk



Gelliwig Residential Centre

I went back to a special place I loved as a kid in North Wales to see what it's like now.

By James Vukmirovic, Senior Reporter

Express and Star reporter, James Vukmirovic, took a nostalgic trip to a house his former school owns to see how much it had changed over the years - and was surprised at how much smaller it felt.

Sometimes, it's nice to be able to go back to something which brings you strong memories after many years away and see if it lives up to that memory.

It might be a holiday destination you went to as a child, a seaside visit with a loved one or a place you visited as a younger person to have an experience or adventure.

In my case, it was a residential home owned by my secondary school **Colton Hills** in Porthmadog in north Wales called **Gelliwig**, a two-storey building which was once a vicarage.



It came into being following the deaths of two teachers from the school, Graham Birch and John Thompson, who both died from heart attacks in 1980. Both were well-respected as teachers and had been well-known for taking young people on school journeys and residential experiences, helping them to see the world outside the four walls of their school.

As a way of marking their memory, the Birch Thompson Memorial Fund was created and plans put into place to honour them through a residential home, with Gelliwig being found, purchased and then opened for use in 1989.

President: Keith Berry, MBE
Chairperson: Gerald O'Hara, Secretary: Jeet Kumar

VAT Registration Number 353970282
Registered Charity No. 512044



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Since then, young people from Colton Hills have had the opportunity to go from **Wolverhampton** to Porthmadog and spend several nights living in the house, experiencing being out of school and enjoying a series of trips and adventures in the area, as well as the centre being a place for hire for all types of groups.

I was lucky enough to go four times to Gelliwig and have memories ranging from a chaotic game of football on Black Rock Sands (my team won 3-2 and I scored the equaliser from 2-0 down) to visiting Starcoast at Pwllheli and visiting Caernarfon Castle.

That was all back in the 1990s, so it has been a long time since, but the memories have never faded and so it was a nice surprise to get an invitation to come and see the house again after it had undergone a substantial refurbishment.

Wolverhampton to Porthmadog is a long ride, taking you over mountains and into valleys, but then heading on a busy A-road through Minffordd onto the Britannia Terrace, with the Blaenau Ffestiniog railway running alongside it, and into the pretty town of Porthmadog.

Gelliwig is on Penamser Road, heading out to Criccieth, and on arrival, I was taken by how familiar it appeared to me, like I'd only been there a week before, not for the first time since 1997, with a cream paint exterior and the wooden sign on the entranceway.

I did notice how it felt a lot smaller than I remembered (although that may have had something to do with the fact that I was 15 the last time I visited it) but ventured inside to see if it looked the same.



One change I noticed straightaway was that there wasn't a door to the lounge, like there had been before, but a door further up which led into a much larger room, with the part further back having been the dining room back in the day.

It also gave me a chance to say hello to a teacher who I hadn't seen in 28 years in Keith Berry (Mr Berry to me as it wouldn't seem right to call a teacher by his first name), who is the general factotum of the Birch Thompson Memorial Fund and the mastermind behind Gelliwig.

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Even in retirement, he still spends his time coordinating fundraising events and working to ensure the place is kept in great condition and has become the president of the fund, so it was a great to be able to say hello and commend him on keeping the place going.



Speaking of which, the refurbishment work, which took place between 2020 and 2022, had included bringing the lounge and dining room together, modernising the facilities and building a new play area at the back called Flinters Field, a name paying tribute to supporter Rachel Heyhoe-Flint.

I remembered that area being granite and shrubs, so it was nice to see a nice all-weather pitch and goals set up on a raised platform, with local MP Liz Saville Roberts on hand to cut the ribbon and declare it open to all.



A number of former Colton Hills pupils, supporters, stakeholders and trustees were there to see the building, as well as watch a special ceremony where Mr Berry was presented with the 2021 Queens Award for Voluntary Service, having not had the opportunity to be there to receive it at the time.

With the formalities done, I took the opportunity to walk around the building and see how different it looked from my teenage years.

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One thing that hits me straightaway is how small the rooms feel now, with four bunkbeds in four of the rooms, plus another two rooms with bunkbeds downstairs, but the rooms still felt airy and comfortable (admittedly, we didn't always get a lot of sleep back then, being young and excitable).

Just walking around made me feel like I was back there again with my class, waiting to use the bathrooms and having those awkward exchanges when you're around people for a longer time than a few hours each day, but it was a nice feeling to be there.

Porthmadog, itself, is a pretty town, full of good shops and cafes, as well as an excellent fish and chips takeaway, and it was nice to reacquaint myself with it over some chips and a cup of tea.

Nostalgia is not a four-letter word, it's something that is worth exploring as you never know what memories it might bring back from a place you remember as a younger person. Embrace it and it might make life more interesting for you.

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