

GRESHAM, COLIN ALASTAIR (1913-1989), archaeologist, historian and author

Name: Colin Alastair Gresham
Date of birth: 1913
Date of death: 1989
Parent: Janie Maud Gresham (née Payne)
Parent: Frank James Gresham
Gender: Male
Occupation: archaeologist, historian and author
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing
Author: Arwyn Lloyd Hughes

born 11 May 1913 at Bexton Croft, a substantial and impressive residence in Toft Road, Knutsford, Cheshire, designed by M. H. Baillie Scott in 1895.

Colin was the younger of the two sons born to Frank James Gresham and his wife, Janie Maud, daughter of John Payne, a Manchester solicitor. His father was an engineer who became a co-director and co-manager with his two elder brothers of Gresham & Craven, a firm established by his grandfather, James Gresham, at Ordsall Lane, Salford, near Manchester, in 1880. (He hailed from Newark-on-Trent, Notts., although there is a record that the family originated from the village of Gresham, near Holt, in north-east Norfolk, as far back as the end of the Middle Ages.) James Gresham was an able engineer and an exceptionally inventive person as his grandson's booklet indicates. He became famous in Britain and abroad (in Australia, South Africa and India in particular) as the inventor and manufacturer of the new vacuum railway brake.

His maternal great-grandfather, Colin Mather was also 'an engineer of ingenuity and brilliance'. He became known as 'Cast-iron Colin'. The Mather family moved from Montrose in Scotland to Manchester, but it is not known when or why they moved there. However, by 1836 Colin and his younger brother, William, had established a small company at 23 Brown Street, Salford. They were described then as 'Engineers, machine makers and millwrights'. In 1852 a partnership was forged between Colin Mather and William Wilkinson Platt, Salford. Indeed, the foundations of the engineering firm which later became known internationally as Mather & Platt Ltd. were laid then. (The Rt. Hon. Sir William Mather (1838-1920) was a great-uncle of Colin Gresham, not his great-grandfather as W. R. P. George asserts in the *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society*, 50 (1989), 38. He was largely responsible for developing and expanding the firm from about 1870 until the end of the century. He came into prominence as a public and political figure and as a very successful businessman - see *Who was Who*.) Family wealth came to Colin Gresham from both sides.

Colin lost his father through pneumonia in 1917 when he was only four years old. It was this family catastrophe which caused his mother to move with her young sons in April 1919 from Knutsford to Cricieth, Caernarfonshire, where she remained until her death in 1945. (She loved Cricieth and the surrounds after spending a holiday there with her husband and later in 1917 and 1918 with her children.)

He was educated at Twyford preparatory school, near Winchester (1922-26), Marlborough College (1926-30), and University College London (B.A., 1935 in architecture; diploma in archaeology, 1937.) (It was decided within the family when Colin was a child that he would be an architect when he grew up and that was to be his destiny, but he admitted years later that pursuing a degree course in archaeology at Cambridge would have appealed much more to him!) He purchased his two farms, Llwyn-yr-hwch, in Blaen Nanmor, Snowdonia, and Penystumllyn, above Cricieth, in 1939 and 1940 respectively. Over the years he became an expert at breeding Welsh Black Cattle.

Colin Gresham began taking an interest in local history and antiquities during his teens. Indeed, he wrote the opening pages of an intended history of Eifionydd in 1928 when he was only fifteen years of age. Soon afterwards he set about learning Welsh, and that mainly (like [Ffransis G. Payne](#)) with the help of *Welsh Made Easy* by A. S. D. Smith ('Caradar'). With the same earnestness he became an accomplished harpist; he had lessons on the instrument by Gwendolen Mason whilst a student in London. Reference should also be made to his love of classical music, especially the works of Wagner; he possessed a large collection of records. Also, whilst in London he became an expert dancer of Scottish reels. He was admitted to the Gorsedd of Bards (Ovate Order in Literature) at the National Eisteddfod at Wrexham, 1933 and took the name 'Pennant' after the township of that name in his beloved Eifionydd. He was elevated to the Druidic Order at the Barry National Eisteddfod in 1968.

He began researching into local history seriously in 1931 and on his archaeological field-work in north-west Wales soon after his graduation in 1935 when he assisted R. E. Mortimer Wheeler and [Wilfrid James Hemp](#). Following a suggestion made to him by [Hemp](#) in 1938, he began surveying sites of early hut circles in south Caernarfonshire. Some of these sites were first discovered then. Afterwards he extended his survey to other parts of the county and to parts of Merioneth and

Anglesey. This research was published jointly with [Hemp](#) later. ([Hemp](#) moved from London to Cricieth in 1939 and from then on they became close friends.) Again they published jointly important studies on Parc (1942), Rhiwlas (1955) and Lasynys (1957), Merionethshire. He acknowledged in the preface to his second volume his indebtedness to [Hemp](#) in the following words: '[he] introduced me to the North Wales School [of ancient sculpture], and trained my eyes to see and my mind to appreciate the details of its monuments'. He dedicated this volume in memory of his friend.

For half a century (1938-88) Colin Gresham published extensively on the archaeology and history of the counties of Caernarfon and Merioneth in various journals. He also contributed to *Atlas Meirionydd* (1974) and to *Atlas Sir Gaernarfon* (1977). He gave the Eifionydd Annual Lecture in 1981 on the subject 'Teulu'r Trefan'. (The lecture was translated into Welsh by Guto Roberts, Rhoslan, who also delivered it on his behalf.) However, his scholarly masterpieces, unquestionably, are his three volumes: *History of Merioneth, volume i: from the earliest times to the age of the native princes* (with [E. G. Bowen](#), 1967); *Medieval stone carving in north Wales...* (1968); *Eifionydd: a study in landownership from the medieval period to the present day* (1973). (One Oxford scholar who reviewed the last volume described it at the time as '[a] Domesday of Eifionydd'.) These works reflect Gresham's obvious masterful and total command of the fields discussed as well as his dedication, thoroughness and conscientiousness over many years. A bibliography of his writings appears in the *Caernarvonshire Historical Society Transactions*, 51 (1990).

In addition to his scholarly work, Gresham gave faithful service, in his courteous and unassuming way, to a number of cultural societies and institutions, e.g. the Cambrian Archaeological Association, the Caernarfonshire (hon. excavations officer) and Merionethshire Historical Societies (he was a vice-president of both), and the Ancient Monuments Board for Wales. As well as being a member of some Bangor diocesan committees (he made a valuable and specialist contribution in advising the Church in Wales on its buildings and its conservationist responsibilities), he was for a long time treasurer and warden of the parish of Cricieth with Treflys. He also took a particular interest in the activities of the National Trust, Cymdeithas Cerdd Dant Cymru (to which he left his two Gothic harps in his will), the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales (he served as hon. secretary of the Caernarfonshire branch for some years), the Snowdonia National Park and Cwmni Drama Cricieth.

The University of Wales conferred the D.Litt. degree honoris causa upon him in 1969. He was elected F.S.A. in 1950 and F.R.Hist.S. in 1973. He was offered the presidency of the Cambrian Antiquarian Association for 1971-72, but declined the honour due to his innate shyness and to his ill-health at the time. The Association presented him with the 'G. T. Clark Memorial Prize' in 1956 and again in 1974 to acknowledge his outstanding contribution to the archaeology and history of north Wales.

Colin Alastair Gresham was a scholar gentleman who shunned publicity. He was unmarried. He died of cancer at 75 years of age on 27 February 1989 at Madog Hospital, Porthmadog, and his remains were cremated at Bangor on 3 March following a public service at St Catherine's church, Cricieth. His ashes, in accordance with his wishes, were scattered on Penystumllyn land from where there is a panoramic view of Cricieth town and castle. A commemorative plaque to him was unveiled in Cricieth library on 23 October 1992. Gresham could have said of the commote of Eifionydd what the historian A. L. Rowse said of Cornwall: 'This was the land of my content'.

Author

Arwyn Lloyd Hughes

Sources

Colin A. Gresham Papers in N.L.W

typescript of his incomplete autobiography in the possession of his nephew, Frank James Gresham, Brill, Bucks.

personal knowledge

Colin A. Gresham, *James Gresham and the vacuum railway brake* (1983)

Marcel Boschi & David Drew-Smythe, [The History of Mather & Platt \(UK\) Ltd](#), published on-line only

Nikolaus Pevsner & Edward Hubbard, *The Buildings of England Cheshire* (1986), 42, 254

The Studio, IV (22), 1895, 127-32

Caernarvonshire Historical Society Transactions, 50 (1989), 37-40; 51 (1990), 11-21

Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society, X(IV), 1989, 275-77

The Antiquaries Journal, LXIX(1989), 409-10

The Cambrian News and Merionethshire Standard, 30 June 1989, 30 Oct.1992

Western Mail, 22 Oct.1992

Baner ac Amserau Cymru, 7 April 1989

Y Casglwr pob peth printiedig, 37 (March 1989)

Y Ffynnon, 144 (March 1989), 184 (November 1992)

A photograph of him appears in *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, X (4), 1989

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q20746762](https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q20746762)

Published date: 2010-07-06

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/> 

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

