

**Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog**  
**St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society**

**From Pembrokeshire's Hidden Gems to Wales' Leading Luxury Hotels**  
**Paula Ellis & Bishop Wyn**

The dream of Keith Griffiths (who grew up in St Davids but has built a considerable reputation as an architect based in Hong Kong) was to take special historic buildings that had lost their original functions, and save them through providing them with new uses. Over the centuries each of the buildings he has taken into his care have had numerous identities – Roch Castle, Twr-y-Felin and Penrhwi Priory – but what they now share is a new existence as luxury retreats.



**Roch Castle**, the oldest of the properties, stands as a single D-shaped tower (similar to the Peel Towers of the Scottish borders) on a volcanic outcrop. Built in the C13th by Thomas de Rupe, one of the Flemish knights of Pembrokeshire, the family eventually took their name from the rock on which the castle stood. It was rebuilt in C14th, when the stone tower replaced an earlier timber structure, it marked the defences at the limit of Norman Wales. The castle changed hands numerous times during the English

Civil War until it was left in a ruinous condition as a result of the full force of Cromwell's field artillery, a force the original builders would never have anticipated. In 1904 Sir J.W. Philipps bought the castle and over a number of years undertook extensive restoration work – including the use of reinforced concrete (which almost destroyed the earlier structures) – in order to make the castle habitable once more. Keith Griffiths eventually took over the castle he had always dreamt of owning and carried out major restoration 2009 – 2010. At last a Welshman owns the castle!

**Twr y Felin** Built in 1806, to harness wind power the original wooden tower of the windmill continued functioning in 1861 and it was not until 1907 that it was rebuilt and incorporated into a large house. By raising the height of the tower, and adding new wings, this was converted into the Twr-y-Felin Hotel. In 2015 work began on the latest restoration but the condition of the original structure had deteriorated so far that part of it actually fell down during building work and plans had to be dramatically altered to save the structure.



**Penrhwi Priory** was built as the vicarage for the parish of St Davids in 1884-6 and continued in that role until 1926. It has served several different functions during its lifespan – including a Retreat House, a Boarding House and the priory of the Mission of St John the Evangelist in 1960s – when the nuns provided a Sunday School for local children. The Retreats Group bought the property in 2008 and after extensive work removing later additions from the original 1880s structure the building opened its doors as a corporate retreat and luxury hotel in 2011.



**Keith Griffiths** grew up in St Davids and went on to own the 5<sup>th</sup> largest architectural firm in the world – mostly working in S.E.Asia building 'hub-cities' where people work, live and play in one location, rather than commute large distances or crowd into already overcrowded cities. This is in great contrast to his goal in Pembrokeshire where he wants to give something back by helping to preserve significant buildings that might otherwise be at risk.

**Roch Castle** has visitors from all over the world for its 6 luxury bedrooms – including ghost-hunters wanting to rid the castle of Lucy Walter's ghost! It has received numerous accolades including Welsh Hospitality's Hotel of the Year, AA 5\*, Trivago's top 5 Welsh hotels and Sunday Times' top 100 in UK.

**Twr y Felin** took 2 ½ years to rebuild – far longer than planned – but is now Wales' first Contemporary Art Hotel – featuring work from young up-and-coming artists. From graffiti artists brought from London (to bring a new urban twist to St Davids) to more local Welsh artists the aim is to bring a 'Sense of Place' and celebrate the importance of local space and culture. The restaurant serves the other hotels in the Retreat Group and prides itself on supporting local producers, with foodstuffs provided from local suppliers wherever possible, for a 'fine dining' experience.

**Penrhwi Priory** has the greatest number of 'return visitors', and people tend to stay for longer. With 12 acres rented from the Cathedral, and in association with PCNP, the plan is to encourage biodiversity in order to create a 'Wild Life Retreat' or 'Respite Retreat'(in conjunction with the St Davids Wellness Centre) – where it can be viewed as more of a year-round destination. Its accolades include AA 5\* Gold as well as inclusion in the Times and Michelin Guide.