

# The man behind Lears

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ONE of the pleasures of a trip to Cardiff as a youth was a visit to the Royal Arcade to browse among the shelves at Lear's Bookshop, a pleasure renewed regularly ever since.

It was of particular interest to me, therefore, to meet the man who was the guiding light behind the development and expansion of the bookshop during those years, into its several branches, a success story which shows that his book on the economics of bookselling was no idle theory.

Eric Bailey is a distinguished bookseller, or rather was, for he retired last year in the centenary year of Lear's. It was his stepfather H J Lear, then in his 70's who brought him into the firm in 1946, Mr Bailey became the managing director and chairman, having bought the controlling share; and retained the chairmanship until 1987, though he passed on the management in 1970 to Mr R E Thomas, so that he could devote more time to the national scene in bookselling.

Mr Bailey is a liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, and as such is a Freeman of the City of London. He has been treasurer and president of the Booksellers Association, and was made an honorary vice-president for life on his retirement.

As chairman of Book Tokens, he organised the company's fiftieth anniversary in 1982 at Stationers Hall, being responsible for presenting the guests to the Queen, who took a particular interest in the occasion as she herself had been given book tokens as a child.

Another national company of which Eric Bailey became the managing director was University Bookshops (Oxford), an associated group of companies all over Britain, which had been started by Blackwell's of Oxford and the Oxford University Press. Mr Bailey had known the Blackwell family before this, and had asked them to acquire a half interest in Lear's, which they did in 1966, acquiring the other half in 1983 when Mr Bailey was 65. The future of the best bookshop in South Wales, which began life in 1887 as a religious bookshop under the Rev. W Lear, was therefore secured.

No ordinary bookseller then, Mr Bailey. He was born in 1918, his mother being from Pontypridd, her grandfather being a Freeman of Llantrisant. His father, who was from Sheffield, died when Eric Bailey was eight. He went to the Royal Masonic School; and to Queen's College, Cambridge, where his degree in natural science stood him in good stead as a radar instructor in the Anti-aircraft Artillery. He saw service in North Africa, and became a Major at the early age of 22. He has been awarded the Territorial Decoration.

Eric Bailey met his wife Lauraine in Anglesey, and they were married in 1941. Lauraine Handcock was from North Lincolnshire, and was also an officer in the Army. Mrs Bailey largely ran Lear's for three years in the early 'Fifties, while her husband was ill: as well as for many years a needlework shop next to Lear's. Some 25 years ago she wrote a series of articles for the *South Wales Spectator* which I wish I had seen previously, for they describe some of the houses and families of Glamorgan.

The Baileys bought Great House, Aberthin in 1953 from Messrs Fisher and Prosser, who had removed some of the Victorian additions. Even though Mr Bailey was ill at the time, they took on the house, with its inevitable problems. With the help of builder and enthusiast Tudor John, a thorough restoration was begun, including a new roof and much work on strengthening floors and walls. Interior work has gone on ever since.

The result is a delight, with original beamed ceilings; flagstones in the hall and kitchen, which also has an original bread oven with an inset cake oven, with its cake-hole on the side — the origin of the slang expression said Mr Bailey; open fire places; some paneling saved in the drawing room. The furniture and pictures have been sensitively chosen, including a dining table from Walter Raleigh's house; some splendid bookcases in the morning room; and several pieces from Mrs Bailey's grandparents in Yorkshire.

At the front of the house is a walled garden and delicious little gatehouse, containing a pigeon loft next to the Aberthin brook. These were all built in the second quarter of the 17th century, probably by William ap Thomas, whose son was known as Robert Williams, and who in turn had one son and two daughters. Gwenllian married a Button of Cottrell, then a Thomas of Llanfihangel, Daughter Cecile married Thomas Matthew of Castellymnach; and the descendants of their third son Andrew lived at Great House until 1820. The house was leased, then sold, before 1900, passing through several hands before the Baileys.

Great House was one of the first houses in Glamorgan to adopt early Renaissance ideas in its building, the idea of external symmetry and the use of a central staircase giving direct access to most rooms of the house. The original and wonderfully robust staircase at Aberthin rises and turns through the three storeys of the house, unusual in being so little altered.

The Baileys have made Great House a very hospitable home. Visitors have included many of the speakers at Lear's literary dinners in Cardiff, like Sir Brian Horrocks; John Braine, Patrick Campbell and Peter Ustinov. As they passed through the gatehouse, I wonder did they ponder the inscription on the sundial, *Dum spectas fugio - While you look, I fly*. Despite the timely warning, it is tempting to stand and stare at this satisfying house. □

