

# SINGLETON PARK, SWANSEA

## *An iconic feature*

Starting from the park's main entrance and proceeding down the path in a south-westerly direction, visitors come to a distinctive landmark: the two-storey Swiss Cottage. Designed by the fashionable architect Peter Frederick Robinson, it replicates one of the timber-built Alpine chalets with their balconies and external stairways which had so impressed him during a visit to Switzerland.

Evidently, such replicas found favour elsewhere in Britain at the time; Robinson subsequently received a commission to design another one, this time for Regent's Park in London. Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century an inn looking like an Alpine chalet had been built in Hampstead; it gave its name to the district which was later named Swiss Cottage.

High up on the gable end of the Singleton Cottage is the date of its completion: 1826. Below it, unmissable in large letters, are the French words *Liberté et Patrie* (Liberty and Motherland), which research reveals as the motto on the flag of Switzerland's Vaud canton. Lower down is admonitory advice in German which can be translated as *Live in such a way that you may live again*. On the eastern side of the cottage, in keeping with a tradition for such buildings, are four lines of an old German hymn and, easier to make out, are more words in German that say *God bless you to the passer-by*.



## *Singleton Abbey*

Robinson also had a major influence on the design of the large country residence which was the family home of the man whose landed estate eventually became today's attractive public park. He was the wealthy industrial entrepreneur John Henry Vivian (1785-1855), who owned and managed the copper-ore smelting works located at Hafod on the east bank of the river Tawe, upstream from Swansea town. Founded by his father in 1810, in time the works became one of the world's largest and most industrially advanced, thanks to John Henry's expertise and enterprise.

An account of his long public service to the people of Swansea and his varied intellectual interests is unnecessary here, but some impression of his achievements in these fields can be gained from his statue in the Maritime Quarter's Ferrara Square. The granite plinth below the larger-than-life Bronze records that John Henry Vivian sat as Member of Parliament for Swansea Borough and districts in six successive Parliaments [between 1832 and his death in 1855]. After his name come the abbreviations FRS and FGS, which show that he had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and a Fellow of the Geological Society. Incidentally, on the back of the plinth a brief inscription ends with the resounding encomium: *universally lamented*.

After his marriage in 1816, John Henry had first leased and later purchased a modest-sized country residence which, unusually, was octagonal in plan. Named Marino, the house was located at the south-eastern end of what is now Singleton Park and commanded a view of the whole picturesque curve of Swansea Bay. Over a number of years, Vivian had this property redesigned and very substantially enlarged stage-by-stage, with remarkable Tudor and neo-Gothic features.

The work was master-minded by Peter Frederick Robinson for a decade from 1827, on the basis of architectural plans that he had submitted some years earlier. As well as the Swiss Cottage, he also designed various minor buildings on the estate, including the impressive gatehouse at the main entrance from the coast road to Oystermouth and Sketty Lane Lodge. There the front garden wall has a rare and intriguing fixture: a post-box marked *PRIVATE MAIL*. It might be asked: how did the Vivian family's residence come to be known as Singleton Abbey? The first element is certainly explained by John Henry's purchase of the nearby Singleton Farm in 1829. Although Singleton was often used in isolation, the full name can be seen on a tithe map of 1843. That is significant as a reminder of the romantic medievalism which had a cherished place in the Victorians' mind-set.



In that connection it is relevant to mention that, among the decorative features of the exterior stonework, one can see carvings of foliage, male heads and grotesques that closely resemble some of the decoration to be found in medieval churches. Also in tune with the spirit of the age is an indicator of social status: high up on the south wall is the stone-carved coat-of-arms of John Henry Vivian impaled with that of his wife Sarah. At its base there is a Latin motto - the gothic lettering is difficult to decipher - which reads *Vive anima Dei* (Live by the spirit of God). As can be worked out, the first six letters represent a near-perfect pun on the family name.

## *Another Vivian legacy*

Just north of the Abbey building, set apart from the main park by trees and shrubs, and a visitor can walk through the extensive Ornamental Gardens, where tall, well-established magnolias and rhododendrons flower with welcome colour from early spring. In these gardens, and on the terrace to the south of the Abbey, Sarah Vivian exercised her considerable horticultural knowledge and expertise.

In the nineteenth century, archery and croquet were popular outdoor recreations among well-off families such as the Vivians. Even today it seems possible to identify a part of the garden where they would have hosted what were known as Archery Meetings. The Gardens also contain, among other original features, the remains of two ornamental fountains and a very substantial rock and earth mound that generations of children must have had fun climbing.