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‘I think of it as a posh caravan’: What it’s like to unexpectedly inherit a house

A new Channel 4 TV show tells the story of an architect couple’s rollercoaster inheritance

Key To A Fortune starts on March 24 at 5.15pm on Channel 4

Helen Brown



Eilir Sheryn and his wife Frederieke van Ellen outside 'Brynglas' in the Brecon Beacons CREDIT: Jay Williams

Just imagine it for a second: a letter arrives out of the blue on the doorstep, saying you’ve unexpectedly inherited a 19th-century cottage, deep in the Brecon Beacons. “It’s like something from a fairy tale, like finding magic treasure,” says Frederieke van Ellen, who has been the proud owner of the whitewashed two-up, two-down house ever since it fell into the hands of her husband, Eilir Sheryn, in 2017, and is now sharing their story on the second episode of Channel 4’s heir-hunter show *Key To A Fortune*, which starts today. But there’s a catch to this dream windfall, says van Ellen: “It fell through the branches of a rather sad and complicated family tree.”



The 19th-century cottage is set into a valley and overlooks the River Towy

CREDIT: Jay Williams

I meet the couple after a dreamy drive through the Welsh hills on a bright spring morning, when the verges are nodding with daffodils. Recent rainfall means the waterfalls are tumbling in exuberant white diagonals down the hillsides. The whitewashed two-up, two-down cottage – known as Brynglas – is set into the lush green slope of a valley overlooking the River Towy and I hear the soothing rush of the current as I park my car beside deep drifts of snowdrops.

An orange-breasted nuthatch sings out from atop the curved limestone wall. Inside, van Ellen and Sheryn, both architects, have the log burner blazing and a plate of nutmeggy Welsh cakes on the table.



Van Ellen and Sheryn are both architects, originally based in Devon

CREDIT: Jay Williams

“My mother made these,” smiles 55-year-old Sheryn. “I was born and grew up in Wales. Both my parents are Welsh. But I was sent off to boarding school at the age of eight and that’s why I sound like this,” – his accent is purely English – “because I had the Welshness taken out of me. This place has re-engaged me with my heritage and this is a lovely, predominantly Welsh-speaking area. It’s not touristy. The people are different to the people I know in England – uniquely warm, charming, charismatic.”

But van Ellen, 57, notes there’s a shadow of sorrow to her husband’s inheritance. The cottage was really intended to end up in the hands of her husband’s father. Hywel Sheryn – a jovial headmaster – had often spoken of his dreams to retire to the cottage where he’d enjoyed so many happy holidays as a child.

“But he was fond of a tall tale,” continues Sheryn, “and so when he talked about pulling all those salmon out of the Towy as a boy, and how he hoped to return as an older man, I didn’t really pay attention. But this place really was left to my dad and his descendants. The letter telling us it belonged to me and my sister landed on the doormat two weeks after he died. I’m sorry he never had the opportunity to return.”

Brynglas was left to Sheryn's father by his "Aunty Lil", who died in 2006 at the age of 100. Lil – a distant cousin – grew up in Brynglas as one of three children born to Mary Jane and Thomas Roderick Thomas, a railway worker. "Lil did very well for herself and married the chief of police in Carmarthen," explains Sheryn, bringing Aunty Lil to life with tales of her scarlet lipstick and many fur coats.

She had a knack of leveraging her new social status by snagging extra rations at the butcher's shop during the war. "She didn't have any children of her own and was close to my grandmother, which meant my dad had many happy holidays here. Only one of Lil's brothers had a child – Rhydian, born 1945 – who was killed in a car accident in 1978. Advertisement : 14 sec

"Rhydian was married," explains van Ellen. "But his wife Julia was English and they didn't have any children. Because the Thomas family wanted it to stay with the Welsh, Julia only had lifetime trust of it rather than proper ownership. She never remarried and the neighbours say she kept it almost as a shrine to Rhydian. After she died [in 2017], the neighbour ended up taking on Julia's old border collie and we got the house."

Sheryn admits that, in the fog of bereavement following the death of his father, he didn't think he'd keep the house. "My sister didn't want it – she lives in Holland and has five kids. Freddie and I didn't need a rural bolthole as we'd moved out of London to live the dream in Devon, 20 years ago. We have four kids, so life is busy."

He first came to visit with his mother on a grey day in 2017 – before they had the keys – more to pay his respects to his recently-deceased father than as a prospective landowner. But a neighbour let them in and Sheryn was moved to see his mother and the neighbour reminiscing – in Welsh – about the place's history. A few months later, he visited it with his wife and she was entranced.



Frederieke van Ellen was 'entranced' by the house on her first viewing

CREDIT: Jay Williams

“I thought it was magical,” says van Ellen. “Inside it was pretty shabby, with 1970s decor. It was very dark. There were spiders everywhere. The kitchen and bathroom were very tatty but, as architects, we could see the potential. Structurally there was nothing wrong with it. On the drive home, we decided we’d buy out my sister-in-law for £75,000, invest around £40,000 in renovations and see if we could afford to keep it.”

Sheryn and van Ellen’s own architectural practice “is very contemporary,” and they quickly realised that their tendency to use lots of glass and metal wouldn’t be in keeping with the surroundings. Instead, they kept the stone fireplace and Auntie Lil’s old dark wood dresser and brightened the place with new windows, white interior beams and contemporary lighting.



The couple decided to keep the original stone fireplace

CREDIT: Jay Williams

They scoured local antiques shops for Georgian farmhouse chairs, and eBay for traditional Welsh wool blankets to throw over the beds upstairs. They modernised the kitchen and bathroom, and put in a sturdy log burner. A sense of Auntie Lil's eccentricity remains: her old stuffed toy cat peers beadily out from a shelf above the fire.



Van Ellen and Sheryn found a lot of the house's furniture in local antiques shops

CREDIT: Jay Williams

Van Ellen and Sheryn rent the place out between family visits; guests can leaf through a book full of black and white family photos that the couple found in an old cardboard suitcase in a loft hatch in the bathroom ceiling. Van Ellen pulls out the suitcase for me and rifles through to show me the diaries kept by Rhydian's father.

"Here is the page from Feb 2, when Rhydian died. You can see how he's drawn around and around the entry in biro. It says: 'A black day'. I felt very shaken, very sad when I first saw that."

Sheryn says that choosing to hang on to Brynglas hasn't been easy – most other beneficiaries featured in the series, presented by *A Place In The Sun*'s Jean Johansson, are forced to sell their new properties because renovation and maintenance is too costly. "We started work on the cottage in January 2019 and took our first paying visitor that October. We were just starting to recoup some money when the pandemic hit." The couple tell me that although the cottage brings in a steady income, they're "nowhere near" recouping their £115,000 investment. "With cleaning and laundry, a changeover after guests leave can cost £150 and the heating here is all electric, which is costly. So this place is an expensive luxury for us, really," says van Ellen.

But as they get older the couple do hope to spend more time in Wales. "We have four children and the youngest just turned 18," says van Ellen. "At the moment they tend to get itchy feet after a couple of days out here, but I hope they grow to appreciate the peace and use it more as they get older."

Sheryn nods. "I enjoy it more and more as I get older. There's a different pace of life here, where you're not bombarded by stuff. I love the sounds of the countryside – the sheep and the birdsong." He grins. "I've come to think of this place as a posh caravan. Thanks, Auntie Lil!"