

The little houses. The cottage tradition in NW Wales

Die kleinen Häuser.
Die Tradition der "Cottages" in N-W Wales

Les petites maisons.
La tradition des "cottages" au N-O du Pays de Galles

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There is a particular pattern of settlement characteristic of the coasts and mountains of North and West Wales, of tiny dwellings scattered on poor land. These landscapes are relics either of the dual economy that sustained the development of mining and quarrying, or of the small-holding tradition that blurred the distinction between farmer and labourer in the lower ranks of rural society. These settlements occupy marginal land, and were often built as encroachments onto common or waste land. They are not ancient – few are earlier than the late eighteenth century, and many are much more recent than that – but they represent the first consistent survival of the homes of the humblest members of rural society.

Early buildings: the habitations of wretchedness?

For all their diminutive size, these little houses stand within a more-or-less formal tradition of building, in favourable contrast to the labourers dwellings of an earlier generation. These earlier houses



Fig. 1. Tiny dwellings on marginal land, Llyn, North-west Wales.

have scarcely ever survived, but there are eye-witness accounts (in the records of travellers and official enquiries) which give descriptions of dwellings built according to quite different traditions. The most celebrated of these is the tradition of the one-night house:

- *The primitive rules to be observed on first taking possession were.... The building site, a waste corner or piece of common land, having been selected, the intending proprietor and his friends proceeded there at nightfall, and with great activity cut clods or square pieces of the greensward... the company commenced building up the walls with the clods... the previously prepared roof was put on and thatched with straw or*

rushes with all proper speed so that the roof should be completed and smoke ascend through the chimney ere the sun rose.

Bygones (1875)

This tradition legitimated the idea that the common land was the peoples land, and is perhaps more important in popular culture than for its contribution to a rural vernacular.

Other early rural cottages may have been built with less haste, but were still quite different from their surviving successors. They were made with found materials, most commonly earth or mud for walling, rough branches and thatch for roofs. This seems to have been true across rural Wales, irrespective of the regional differences displayed in houses of a higher status:

- *Their walls are of mud, about five feet high, with a low thatched roof, surmounted at one end by a wattle and dab chimney (SW Wales)* *Lewis (1833)*
- *Mud cottages, one storey high, with rush-clad roofs (North Wales)* *Evans (1812)*
- *Mud and wattling, rush or heather thatch (mid Wales).* *Thomas (1893)*
- *'The frame of the roof was formed by branches of trees fixed to larger timbers by straw and hay bands' (Snowdonia).* *Bingley (1804)*

Stone was also used, but only where it too was freely available.

- *The cottages are constructed of loose stones, such as are found in abundance around the bases of the mountains... (Snowdonia).* *Lewis (1833)*
- *The cottages are formed of a few loose fragments of rock and shale, piled together without mortar or white-wash (Snowdonia).* *Royal Commission (1847)*

All these were materials which were easily available at little cost. The buildings that used them were not necessarily craftless – the construction of a mud walled cottage for example, was a laborious process: 'Their walls are built of cobb, that is an argillaceous earth having straw or rushes mixed with it, placed in layers between boards' (Lewis 1833). But they were capable of being built without specialist skills either in the preparation of materials or in the construction.

In some areas, these humble building traditions have survived – there are still significant numbers of straw-thatched, mud-walled buildings in Ceredigion,



Fig. 2. An encroachment onto waste-land, Snowdonia, North-west Wales.

for example, and a smaller number of clay buildings on the Llyn peninsular, in areas lacking good building stone. Elsewhere, though, surviving buildings mark a departure from these expedient traditions, and suggest that as the nineteenth century advanced, the smallest farmers and labourers were able to draw on the mainstream of regional vernacular.

Small but substantially built: vernacular architecture and the cottage

The introduction of regional vernacular traditions to cottage building is marked by the appearance of conventions of design on the one hand, and specialist local traditions of construction on the other. Vernacular character can perhaps be seen at its clearest in the realm of materials and techniques. In spite of the superficial abundance of stone in much of North Wales, good building stone was not often freely to hand, but had to be quarried, hauled onto site, worked and dressed, before being skillfully assembled in walling. Local availability determined the kind of stone used - nothing was moved very far – and in some areas there was a plentiful supply that needed minimal quarrying. But the way in which stone was used varied. Most of the surviving buildings (including the remains of long-abandoned buildings) show evidence for the dressing of stone, the careful selection of good facing stone for thick rubble walls, and considerable skill in construction. Some are built with minimal mortar and are virtually dry-stone walled, using a technique in which the joints

are pegged with chippings or smaller stones. Examples like this show particular skill and awareness of the qualities of the material. The selection, dressing and coursing of stone may sometimes suggest a conscious aesthetic on the part of the builder.

No less important was the introduction of lime: this valuable commodity provided mortar for stone walling, and was the basis of render and limewash. But whilst mortar and limewash were common in some areas of Wales by the beginning of the nineteenth century, their introduction elsewhere took place much later. Nor should this be surprising: limestone is limited in its



Fig. 3. Well-made stone walls surviving in a long-abandoned dwelling, Llyn, North-west Wales.

occurrence in Wales, and the shipment of either the stone or the lime over considerable distances contributed to the expense of what was effectively a manufactured product. The rough-rendering of joints, and the use of limewash were almost ubiquitous by the end of the nineteenth century, and always indicate expenditure. Limewash served a double purpose – practical as weatherproofing, but also pleasing in appearance. Varied wall treatment in a single building suggests an aesthetic choice (albeit partly economically determined), with limewash sometimes reserved for the main elevation of the dwelling, and ancillary buildings more often bare stone.

Slate roofing was becoming common closest to quarries at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and its use was widespread by the century's end, though thatch was still found in areas distant from the quarries. Most surviving buildings have slate roofs, though these may in some cases be secondary. In its progress from ground to roof, the slate was laboriously extracted, worked in the quarry, transported to the site, then laid on a substantially timbered roof structure. There are though, noticeable differences in the quality of slates used – roofs of very small grouted slates suggest a poorer quality material; the occasional exceptionally large slates may have been intended originally for some other purpose. There are also clear differences in the craft of slating, with the selection and grading of slates indicating special skill. There is sometimes evidence for use of the most uniformly coloured slates on the main elevation, suggesting again a conscious aesthetic.

The social significance of the use of these materials is clear in the words of contemporary observers. In the more mountainous parts of Caernarvonshire in 1812, the cottages were 'constructed of loose stones ...piled on each other, the interstices caulked or stuffed with moss'; but at the same time, 'the houses of the small farmers ... have these openings filled with mortar, and in some few instances, plastered and whitewashed' (Evans 1812).

Thus lime first makes its appearance in the houses of 'a better class'. The same was true of other more permanent materials (slate, stone). Small farmers on



Fig. 4. Limewash and slate in a small cottage, Llyn, North-west Wales.

the Llyn peninsular, for example, were using stone (and sometimes slate) for their own houses at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but were still building cottages for their labourers out of earth and straw thatch (Roberts 1973). This is not surprising when it is remembered that what was entailed wherever slate and mortared stone was used, was the expense of materials transformed by skilled labour.

The artistry of these better houses was not lost on contemporary observers:

- *In the more frequented [and more prosperous] parts of the county, between Caernarvon and Conway, both cottages and superior dwellings are chiefly built of stone, quarried for the purpose, and though these consist of shapeless masses, they are so artfully put together that the very irregularity of the seams is not unseemly. The roofing is generally formed of the fine blue slate, dug in the vicinity, which, when the walls are whitewashed or roughcast, gives them a very cheerful aspect'*
Evans (1812)

'Artful' building of this kind suggests professional craftsmanship and the expenditure of resources, and defines a new tradition.

There are similar shifts in other aspects of building: take the fireplace, for example: the poor, primitive cottages of the early nineteenth century appear to have lacked chimneys altogether:

- *Many of these huts..are without chimneys, the smoke escaping by a hole at one end of the building (Caernarvonshire)*
Lewis (1833)

- *'a tapering aperture in the roof serves as a chimney but quite as often as not, the smoke escapes by the door, or oozes through the partitions'*. (Mid Wales)

Thomas (1893)

Not so the surviving cottages, some of which even include a false chimney stack.

Similarly for other detail, such as windows: 'some have lattices for the admission of light formed by interwoven sticks; but for the most part light is admitted through the entrance way, for door there is none' (William 1993); 'many of these hovels have no window'



Fig. 5. A balanced façade achieved with one false chimney stack, Llyn, North-west Wales.

(Royal Commission 1847); how much better the sash windows of later examples. And again, early cottages were apparently often single roomed, with partitions, if any, contrived of furniture or cloth (Peate 1940). The nicely made (if simple) detail of Frondeg suggests once again, craftsmanship and expense.

There were corresponding transformations in plan. Surviving cottages, whilst small, are mostly of 2 rooms, with a half or whole loft. Some slightly bigger dwellings have a small third room partitioned off. This parallels very closely the planning of the larger regional house, which had a similar layout, though on a bigger scale. The ubiquity of the central door and flanking windows in cottage planning reflects, surely, the nineteenth century ubiquity of the Georgian house type in rural Wales.

Most of these cottages follow that axiom of vernacular planning in which the arrangement of the elevation is clearly dictated by the disposition of interior space. The asymmetry of the façade thus reflects the interior division into two rooms (kitchen and chamber), with a main fireplace and (though not always) a smaller secondary chimney. The conceit of symmetry is rare, but there is often nonetheless a sense of composition. One of the most telling signs of this is the practice of balancing the exterior with two chimneys where there was in fact only a single fireplace. Developments like these suggest the introduction of aesthetic conventions which if they did not originate in larger houses, were at least shared with them.



Fig. 6. Limewash and sash windows in a small roadside dwelling, Llyn, North-west Wales. (All photographs are Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments).

The widespread distribution of the lofted cottage with its two roomed plan and central doorway suggests a powerful convention of building which places cottage construction within the mainstream of the vernacular tradition. Small variations on this theme can be traced and appear significant. There are differences in size and scale, including not only number of rooms and their size, but also eaves height. There are subtle distinctions of composition (for example the regularity or otherwise of window size and height). There are also clear differences in constructional sophistication ranging from choice of building stone and skill in coursing, to window type. Variations like these reflect

significant differences in access to resources, economic status and social position, and are important evidence for the intricate structure of a traditional rural society. The survival of these small dwellings, and the small detail of their construction, affords a direct view of the lives of labourers and small-holders, and helps to complete a picture of rural society, revealing a social structure of remarkable range and complexity.

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