

The Landmark Trust

CAUSEWAY HOUSE, BARDON MILL, NORTHUMBERLAND

Causeway House lies in the Northumberland National Park at the side of the road leading down to the Roman Fort of Vindolanda. It is a rare surviving example of a building thatched with heather, a feature once fairly common in upland areas and is now the only one left in Northumberland.

The house and its adjoining buildings were built in 1770, the date marked on the carved shield at the centre of the front door lintel. It was possibly built for the Thompsons of Tow House - it was common to put a husband and wife's initials on their new house and this could be the T R.A in the plaque.

Aligned east-west, facing south, Causeway House comprises a two-storeyed main block, with, on the left, a byre and granary above, and a single-storeyed attached stable/loose box on the right. Its walls are constructed of neatly coursed sandstone, with the corners tied by alternating quoins, which project slightly from the wall face, as do the plain architraves of the doors and windows. The gabled roof has triangular sandstone blocks set like reversed crowsteps to form the verge. The roof pitch is steep at 50°, a common feature of thatched structures and necessary to ensure effective drainage.

The house itself was comprised of a ground floor kitchen/living room with a single front window providing the natural lighting downstairs. This is a tall 4-pane sash window set into an opening which has clearly been increased in size at some stage. Upstairs there was a chamber divided into two with one window for the landing and one for the bedroom.

Against the gable wall stands a kitchen range surrounded by a plain lintel and jambs. The range bears the date 1912 and was supplied by John Liddel and Sons of Haltwhistle. The oven, on the right, is set above the level of the fire which is a common feature on northern English ranges.

The upstairs chamber was divided into two rooms by a plank partition set up against the roof truss. Both rooms had planked wainscoting covered with wallpaper. To the right of the chimney breast was a built-in cupboard lined with sheets of the Newcastle Journal of 27th May 1947.

From the landing, a flap could be lowered over the stairwell thus allowing access to the granary via the simple plank door in the dividing wall. This room is lit by a single sash window and has a loading door in the west gable. There are three internally splayed slit vents in the rear wall. Surprisingly the foot of the principal roof truss sits directly above the window. The rafters are made from branches or roughly spit sections of tree trunk nailed onto the horizontal purlins. Some are full length reaching from wall to ridge, while in other places there are two levels of rafters, all set close together.

Underneath the granary is the byre, with a north-south through passage and stalling for 12 cattle. The concrete flooring is raised above the central walkway, down which runs a groove to drain urine out through the front door. Ventilation is again provided by slits in the walls.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

When the Trust acquired Causeway House from Mr & Mrs Wanless in 1988 it had been abandoned as a house for over 20 years and was just used as a store. It had therefore survived with very little alteration, and its heather thatch roof was still preserved beneath a later corrugated iron cover. Although heather was always widely available, it was seldom used once slate became a cheap alternative in the 19th century.

One of the first jobs was to remove this old thatch, known locally as 'Black Thack'. An unusual collection of items was discovered - a child's clog shoe, an iron key, a pewter table spoon, an iron hook and four cotton dresses - working clothes of about 1890-1900. Several of these items may have been deposited as good luck charms.

To re-thatch the roof vast quantities of long-stemmed heather were required. The Forestry Commission offered a site that was intended for burning and planting, and an entire acre was stripped by using powered cutters as well as pulled in the traditional way. The heather was two feet long on average, and bound into 'loggins' and thence into 'threaves' (25 loggins), it totalled four large high-sided lorry loads.

Originally the closely-spaced roof timbers would have first been overlaid with hand dug 'divots', and so the modern equivalent - lawn turf, was used laid 'green-side' down to stop the drying soil falling out. The thatching, carried out by master thatcher John Warner, started at the eaves and progressed to the ridge in horizontal courses. Although the thatch at the eaves has no apparent thickness, it is actually up to two feet thick. Each course was fixed with modern thatching hooks securing an iron bar or 'sway' to hold the heather in place onto the rafters. Heather is a material which is laid 'upside down' compared to other materials in that the root end is placed on the inside against the turf.

The ridge, which needs the longest lengths of heather, was held in place with long hazel and willow spars used like giant hair-pins. After clipping the rough ends, it was finally dressed with a layer of turf, green side up, which is a traditional way of finishing Northumbrian roofs. Finally the thatch was given a protective layer of black mesh that at first was secured by spars positioned in the hollows that form on heather roofs. Unfortunately, this made the roof look like a giant buttoned sofa and so the spars were all moved to the 'hills'. This looked much better and the result was a roof that lasted some 20 years. In 2008, this whole process was repeated, still using heather, but this time done by Stephen Letch who looks after several other Landmark thatched buildings in East Anglia. He specialises in long-straw thatching, which is a less commonly-used form of thatching these days, but not dissimilar to how a heather thatch roof is laid.

The various outhouses were removed, and working with Stewart Tod & Partners, our architects, a new single storey kitchen and bathroom block was added to the rear, with a lobby and door to outside, all under a handsome stone tiled roof. This meant that the original kitchen/living room could be used just as a sitting room. The chimney stack, which had had a brick top in 1988, was rebuilt in stone.

Upstairs the partition was removed to create a single large double bedroom boarded on the walls and ceiling, and by making a new doorway through to the granary at the head of the stairs, a twin bedroom was formed. The latter, though difficult to keep warm, allows you to sleep under the knotted tent-like thatch.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Causeway House sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.