

The Landmark Trust

COOMBE, MORWENSTOW, NR. BUDE, CORNWALL

The first known reference to Coombe is in 1520, but the mile of sheltered valley running inland from Duckpool has been lived in continuously from very early times. A decayed earthwork in Stowe Woods at the head of the valley is an Iron Age fort and the hidden site of the hamlet is typical of ancient habitations in Cornwall. Although the earliest of the existing houses date only from the 17th century, they are likely to stand on older sites. The hamlet stands lies on the southern edge of the parish of Morwenstow. It was until recently divided between two landowners. The land west of the stream belonged from the 1540s until 1922 to the Duchy of Cornwall, as part of the manor of Eastway. The land east of the stream was originally part of the manor of Northleigh, or Lee, which until the Elizabethan period was owned by the Coplestone family, but soon afterwards passed to the Grenvilles of Stowe on the hillside above. It remained part of the Stowe estate until 1949.

Coombe is listed as one of the 'principal villages' of the parish of Morwenstow by Daniel Lysons in *Magna Britannia* Vol. III, published in 1814. This makes it sound quite big and indeed it was once much larger: in the middle of the 19th century there were between twelve and fifteen households here, but by 1891 these had shrunk to just three. By the beginning of the 20th century Coombe had become a favourite stopping place for walkers, gaining a mention in most Cornish guidebooks from the 1890s onwards. Official recognition of its landscape came in 1930 when the Council for the Protection of Rural England recommended that the whole Coombe Valley, along with the coastal path, should be preserved as a place of outstanding natural beauty. It was another thirty years before this hope was realised, but in 1960 the National Trust acquired the first of several holdings, on the south side of the valley. Between 1966 and 1969, the hamlet itself was bought by the Landmark Trust, as part of a joint scheme with the National Trust to preserve it and its exceptional setting.

THE MILL AND MILL HOUSE

Coombe Mill features in Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho*, whose heroine, Rose of Torridge is sent to stay with her uncle here. There has been a mill at Coombe since at least 1694 and probably long before that, although the present one dates from 1842. Most of Mill House is earlier, the thatched part predating 1700 while that roofed in slate is an addition of around 1800. The plan is typical of small farmhouses in remote areas, from the Tudor onwards: one room deep, with two ground floor rooms. The main room has a wide fireplace on the back room (now No. 1) while the inner room has its fireplace on the end gable (now in No. 2).

FORD COTTAGE

Ford Cottage is long and low, its upper storey being little more than a loft. It dates from the mid 17th century. Both chimneys have cloam bread ovens from Bideford; the end chimney looks like an early addition. It has been much altered over the centuries, but originally had a parlour at the ford end whose partition was just to the left of the front door; a main room or hall in the middle for cooking and eating whose fireplace backed onto the entry or cross passage and finally a service room. The cross passage ran through the current bathroom. There were once stairs against the back wall of the sitting room. Soon after 1914, a tearoom was run in Ford Cottage, which continued right up to Landmark's acquisition of the cottage in 1966.

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THE CARPENTER'S SHOP

This appears on the 1840 tithe map as standing on land belonging to John Tape, a carpenter then living in Ford Cottage (Tapes lived in Coombe for generations, the last only leaving in 1968). Its roughly dressed stone and flat brick arches are typical of the early 19th century. The windows, with vertical bars and overlapping glass, are of the kind found in many workshops and industrial buildings. Latterly, the building was used as a store for many years and was becoming derelict by the time Landmark acquired it.

HAWKER'S COTTAGES

Being on the other side of the stream, Hawker's Cottages belonged to Eastway rather than Stowe and led a separate life until the 20th century. Although the two halves have been a single dwelling for most of their history, it is clear that the two ends were built at different times. No. 2 is the older half. With walls that are two feet thick, a pegged collar rafter roof and a cloam bread oven, it has much in common with Ford Cottage and probably also dates from the mid 17th century. Here, however, the living accommodation seems to have been on the first floor with a workshop or even a byre on the ground floor. The half that now forms No. 1 was probably added in the mid to late 18th century.

By the 1820s this Coombe farmhouse enjoyed a short phase as a gentleman's residence, home to Robert Hawker, famous as the writer and poet, the Vicar of Morwenstow. Hawker's own writings and many anecdotes about him provide much local colour and it was he who built King William's Bridge over the stream to replace a smaller one that often flooded. A succession of tenants passed through the cottage through the nineteenth century, including some ubiquitous Tapes, sometimes as one, sometimes in two households. Once Landmark became involved, our custodians lived in No. 1 until 1985.

CHAPEL COTTAGE

A Bible Christian chapel is marked on the OS map of Coombe for 1885 and it had probably stood there already for some 20 years before that. Rev. Hawker was often vehement in his condemnation of the Dissenters but the influence of the Church of England had declined steadily and the Bible Christians were a Cornish offshoot of Wesleyan Methodism that moved so effectively to fill the vacuum. The Coombe Meeting Room was also referred to as the Coombe Tabernacle, presumably because it was not only made of wood but also equipped with wheels. The congregation must have felt confident in a degree of permanence, however, since they gave it a slate roof. The chapel was sold in 1922 and the Tapes built the bungalow alongside it.

COOMBE CORNER

Coombe Corner was built in the 1930s, representing an altogether different approach to building, all light and views, compared to the hunkered-down solidity of the cottage in the valley. The plot was the last piece of land in the valley not owned by either Landmark or the National Trust and as such its acquisition in 1984, though pre-emptive, was an important one.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Carpenter's Shop, Chapel Cottage, Ford Cottage and the Mill Houses sleep up to 4 people. Hawker's Cottage No. 1 sleeps up to 5 and Hawker's Cottage No. 2 and Coombe Corner sleep up to 6. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.