

The Landmark Trust

LLWYN CELYN, LOWER CWMYOY

Grade-I listed, Llwyn Celyn has been dated by timber analysis to 1420. The house has changed little since the late-17th century, and it is chiefly this period that Landmark's restoration seeks to highlight. Despite much research, we still do not for sure who built this core house at Llwyn Celyn, or why. The house stood on the Llanthony Priory estate, and was built just as Wales emerged from the destruction of Owain Glyn Dŵr's Rising of 1401-15. Very few vernacular Welsh houses survive from before 1400, which makes Llwyn Celyn, as an exceptionally high status house for its day, all the more intriguing.

Llwyn Celyn still has its classic medieval floorplan. As first built, it had a 3-bay central hall, open to fine roof timbers, up to which smoke rose from a fire in the middle of the floor. The hall was the central living space for the whole household. The lord or master sat at a big table at the 'high' end, where the fixed bench here is a rare survival. At the 'low' end of the hall, beyond a wooden screen or partition, ran a cross passage, and beyond that were the buttery and the pantry, for storing wet and dry goods respectively.

The two-storey solar wing (private rooms for the lord) is primary are another rare feature. The top floor was perhaps reached by a spiral stone staircase leading up from the hall, now lost, but whose pointed doorway was uncovered during the restoration (or this may have been an alcove for display). The solar was also accessed from the high end of the hall through a finely carved wooden doorhead with blank shields. There are two even finer doorheads in the cross passage, their carving exceptional in a Welsh domestic context.

Also unusual is the survival of a spere truss. A truss is an arch that supports the roof, and a spere truss is a more decorative one extending down to the ground floor, with an opening to provide a ceremonial entrance to a hall. At Llwyn Celyn, its timbers can still be seen in the cross passage. Before the chimneystack blocked it, a central opening in this spere truss gave a direct view of the two fine doorheads in the cross passage from the high table. Llwyn Celyn was clearly built for someone of great status, perhaps even for the prior of Llanthony Priory himself.

After the Dissolution, the priory estates were bought in 1546 by a rich lawyer, Nicholas Arnold, whose family owned them until 1726. From then on, Llwyn Celyn became a tenanted farm. Llanthony tenant farmers grew rich in the 16th and 17th centuries thanks to low rents on long, copyhold leases and rising produce prices. They farmed steep slopes, but also had grazing rights on common and waste land on the peaks. The mountains' geology yields good building stone in naturally cleaved blocks. All this allowed the farmers to build other good, sound farmhouses and outbuildings, which still dot the valley today.

The Watkins of Llwyn Celyn were once such farming dynasty and around 1690, big improvements were made in the house. William Watkin, or possibly his brother Thomas, inserted a ceiling into the open space of the hall to make a large chamber above on the

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first floor, reached by a new wooden staircase put in alongside a huge new chimney stack for a fireplace and bread oven. At the same time, a separate kitchen added at to the back of the house, with another bread oven. A beast house and little building beside the threshing barn (which therefore predates 1695) were built in the same years, and probably the cider house and piggery too. The Watkins created Llwyn Celyn as we see it today, and after them, little changed in the house. By now the farm had all the usual buildings needed for self-sufficiency: a threshing barn, cider house, beast house, stables, pigsty and kiln houses for drying malt for brewing and corn.

In 2014, Llwyn Celyn was very dilapidated and it passed into the care of Landmark. Our restoration has kept as much original fabric in the main house as possible, gently returning it to its appearance c.1700 when the hall had just been ceiled over and the chimneystack inserted. This meant the reversal of a few 19th and 20th century changes but little else. A two-year restoration project involved many skilled craftsmen and engineers, and saw traditional craft skills passed on to apprentices and visiting groups.

Discoveries were made during the works: as well as the hall fireplace and the alcove for a Victorian range in today's kitchen, the blocked arched doorway in the hall was uncovered, and also the first floor south-facing window in the solar block. Two old shoes, one of 17th-century date, were found concealed (possibly against witchcraft) and these were care left in situ in their hiding places under the eaves.

Community consultation led to the transformation of the 18th-century Threshing Barn into flexible educational and exhibition spaces for community use. An interpretation room about the valley and its history has been created in the former Beast House for walkers and passing visitors, open during daylight hours. Partnerships have been built with local bodies, and a thriving local history group has been started in the valley.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays to pay for their future maintenance. At the top of the site, Llwyn Celyn sleeps up to 8 people. In its own setting below, the Threshing Barn is available for separate hire for a variety of low-key community and educational uses. To book Llwyn Celyn for a holiday, or the Threshing Barn for other uses, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk or contact Landmark's Booking Enquiries on 01628 825 925.