

The Landmark Trust

LOWER PORTHMEOR: THE CAPTAIN'S HOUSE AND THE FARMHOUSE

You will no longer find a village called Porthmeor on a map and the name has passed instead to one of Cornwall's most famous surfing beaches, a few miles round the headland in St Ives. Lower Porthmeor, in its grouping and siting and the forces that have gone into its continuation, is representative of many other hamlets on this northern shelf of Penwith, and is also among the most attractive of all the groups of buildings along a spectacular stretch of coast.

Apart from the fact of its existence, we know nothing for certain about the hamlet's appearance before 1600, at the earliest. The likelihood is that the settlement would have been laid out in a similar way to today, but on a much smaller scale, with tiny yards and enclosures. The earliest houses would have been little different from the humble single storey building on the north of the site, with a single door and two tiny windows. The cow-houses and other agricultural buildings would have been like that next to it.

Houses excavated at Mawgan Porth near Newquay of the 8th or 9th century were found to have been of this kind, although there the walls were constructed in the same manner as Cornish hedges - two skins of stone, with packed clay or earth between. Sometimes there would have been a sleeping loft, sometimes they may have conformed to the "long-house" pattern, with the outer room acting as a byre for animals.

We shudder with discomfort at the thought of living in such structures today, and certainly, as soon as wealth permitted, they were improved on. Yet they were solid and well-insulated, providing warmth as well as shelter. As a building type they endured for over a thousand years, well into the 17th century.

It was not until then that the prosperity that had brought about the boom in vernacular house construction known as Great Rebuilding reached this westernmost peninsula, a century later than other parts of the country. Then the older houses started to be rebuilt, with an additional storey, or new windows perhaps, and another room built on the end. As with their predecessors, few of these survive, having vanished when they themselves were rebuilt, unless put to new use as a farm building, or kept on as the dwelling of a labourer or poor relation. A garden wall at Higher Porthmeor is in fact part of another such house, of quite a substantial kind. The Upper House at Higher Porthmeor also bears witness to its 17th-century origin, with a lintel carved with the date 1682. No doubt other fragments have been reused in later buildings, such as window lintels, and dressed stone quoins.

The other great improvement by the 17th century was the chimney. None of this date survive, as such, at Porthmeor, but a method of construction was developed which endured into the 20th century, with very little change apart from the disappearance after 1700 of a chamfered edge on the great stones of the fireplace surrounds. Both the Captain's House and The Farmhouse has one of these huge projecting chimneypieces, and they occur in most of the other farms along the coast. Matthews in 1892 remarked of them: "Here may still be commonly seen the immense open chimney, with dried furze and turf piled up on the earthen floor of the kitchen".

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None of the houses at Lower Porthmeor dates from before the end of the 18th century. Even then few houses in Penwith were built with two full storeys; the pattern remained that of a single storey with a now rather more spacious loft. So the house nearest the road – now known as The Captain's House - contains within its larger end a smaller and lower house, the roofline of which was found in the walls when plaster was stripped off in 1988. This could date from 1800 or even a bit before. However the Tithe Apportionment Map for Zennor of 1842, although it lists a house and garden here, only shows what seems to be a smaller building again, hardly even a house. The National Trust's Vernacular Buildings Surveyors have suggested that this was because the house was only then being built - and such are the difficulties of dating, a range of fifty years either way is quite acceptable.

The house that almost certainly does date from soon after 1800 is The Farmhouse, which is clearly marked on the Tithe Map of 1842. It also appears in the first edition of the 1" Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1805, although not published until 1813. The leap in terms of civilisation from the earlier houses is immense.

The Farmhouse has been little altered, but The Captain's House, has gone through a number of different stages. First there was the small house already described. Then a building was added onto its lower end, blocking a window in the gable. It is thought that the new building began life as a cow-house, because a drain runs out of it directly under one of the sides of the fireplace, which must therefore be a later addition, to convert this end into a house as well. A house it certainly was in 1860 when Arthur Berryman (known to family tradition as Captain Arthur) was born there. Soon afterwards, however, the upper end was enlarged, with a full second storey added. The family moved in there, and the lower end became a cow-house or stable again, and has remained so. This had happened by the time of the 1881 census, when an uninhabited house was recorded.

The other farm buildings at Lower Porthmeor are all 19th century. The long cow-house, running uphill from The Farmhouse, is marked on the 1842 Tithe Map. It already had a granary (locally called a barn or chall-barn) at the top end. On the upper floor of this the grain was stored, while cows lived below. Another cow-house, known as the Four-house for obvious numerical reasons, was added in the later 19th century by Robert Berryman, Captain Arthur's father. Robert Berryman also built the very charming, and rather grand, barn (i.e. granary) immediately next to the Farmhouse, probably in about 1880. Its cambered lintels may, perhaps, have been reused from another building. It had a pig-house on its lower end, and there was another pig-house, now roofless, at the other side of the yard.

Lower Porthmeor has an important literary connection, since author Virginia Woolf passed the summer of 1910 here, lodging with the Berryman family. Virginia Woolf had spent happy childhood holidays in St Ives with the rest of her family – her parents Leslie and Julia Stevens owned Tallant House above Porthminster Beach. After Julia's death in 1895, this house was let out, but St Ives and Cornwall were always a place of recuperation for Virginia, who suffered recurrent bouts of depression and nervous exhaustion. It was to recover from one such that she came, aged 28, in 1910, with Jean Thomas as her companion for long walks over the moors. Virginia Woolf's novels *To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out*

Across the road is Arra Venton, originally a smithy and a tiny Non-Conformist chapel. This too is in Landmark's care and let for holidays, but is not open to the for the Golden Weekend.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Captain's House and the Farmhouse sleep up to 4 people. Arra Venton sleeps up to 5. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk