

# The Landmark Trust

## LOWER PORTHMEOR: THE CAPTAIN'S HOUSE, THE FARMHOUSE & ARRA VENTON

Lower Porthmeor, in its grouping and siting and the forces that shaped it, is representative of many other hamlets on this northern shelf of Penwith In farthest West Cornwall. It is also one of the most attractive of all the groups of buildings along this outstandingly scenic stretch of coastline.

A hamlet existed here before 1600, though nothing is known of its form. The settlement would probably have been laid out similar to what survives today, but on a smaller scale. The earliest houses would have been much like the humble single storey building on the north of the site, with a single door and two tiny windows and looking little difference to the cow-houses and other agricultural buildings alongside. Sometimes, these early dwellings had a sleeping loft, sometimes they conformed to the 'long-house' pattern, the outer room acting as a byre for animals. Although humble, they were solid and well-insulated, providing warmth and shelter. As a building type they endured for over a thousand years, well into the 17th century.

The prosperity that brought about the boom in vernacular house construction known as Great Rebuilding only reached this westernmost peninsula around 1600, a century later than many other parts of the country. Older houses began to be rebuilt, given an additional storey or new windows, perhaps extended. As with their predecessors, few of these survive, having vanished when they themselves were upgraded, 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 part of another such house, of quite a substantial kind. The Upper House at Higher Porthmeor also bears witness to a 17th-century origin, with a lintel carved with the date 1682. No doubt other such fragments have been reused in later buildings, such as window lintels, and dressed stone quoins.

As modern farming practices began to disrupt the ancient field patterns in the late-20th century, the National Trust decided that preservation of the Penwith area should be made a priority. In 1985, they launched an appeal to buy land there under Enterprise Neptune. As a result, in 1987 the Landmark Trust took a lease in Lower Porthmeor with the object of saving the now empty and derelict buildings there. The Farmhouse and the Captain's House opened as Landmarks in 1990.

None of the three 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 more spacious loft. 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 1842 Tithe Map for Zennor, while listing a house and garden here, shows only what seems to be a smaller building again, hardly even a house. Perhaps the bigger house was only then being built - such are the difficulties of dating vernacular buildings that a range of fifty years either way is quite acceptable.

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The **Farmhouse** almost certainly dates from soon after 1800, and is clearly marked on the 1842 Tithe Map. It also appears in the first edition of the 1' Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1805 (not published until 1813). It represents a major leap in terms of comfort from the earlier houses. The Farmhouse has been little altered over the years, but The **Captain's House** has gone through a number of different stages. First there was the small house already mentioned. Then a building was added onto its lower end, blocking a window in the gable. This new building probably 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 second dwelling. A house it certainly was in 1860 when Arthur Berryman was born there. He was known by family tradition as Captain Arthur, giving the house its eventual name.

Soon afterwards, however, the upper end was enlarged, by adding a full second storey. The family then moved in there, and by the 1881 census the lower end may have become a cow-house or stable again, since an uninhabited house was recorded. Once Landmark took the site on, the barn was used at first for heating plant, by inserting a boiler room. In 2024-6, this was cleared and the barn was brought into the Landmark accommodation, as a large and airy kitchen and breakfast room. Captain's former kitchen now became the sitting room, and the former sitting room became a level access bedroom, with a new shower room created in the adjacent former housekeeper's store. At the same time, ground source heating was installed for all three Landmarks at Lower Porthmeor, to feed new heating and hot water systems in all three buildings. The **Farmhouse** was redecorated and refurbished at the same time.

The other farm buildings at Lower Porthmeor all date from 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 large barn immediately next to the Farmhouse, probably in about 1880. It had a pig-house on its lower end, and there was another pig-house, now roofless, at the other side of the yard. In 2020-21, during the Covid-19 pandemic, major repairs to the barns were enabled by the Culture Recovery Fund.

Lower Porthmeor also has important literary associations. Author Virginia Woolf spent the summer of 1910 here, lodging with the Berryman family. Virginia had spent happy childhood holidays in St Ives with the rest of her family – her parents Leslie and Julia Stevens owned Talland House above Porthminster Beach. After Julia's death in 1895, Talland 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 to stay at Lower Porthmeor, aged 28, in 1910. With Jean Thomas, her carer-companion, she went for long walks over the moors. Woolf's later novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1937) all draw directly from her memories of this part of Cornwall. D. H. Lawrence lived at Zennor with his wife Frieda from 1915 to 1917, when Katherine Mansfield also joined the literary community he aspired to establish there.

## **ARRA VENTON**

Across the road from The Captain's House and The Farmhouse is Arra Venton, a building of somewhat mixed parentage. It was once two buildings, a tiny Nonconformist chapel and a smithy, both as satisfying in their simple granite construction as the farmsteads. Early in the 20th century, a cottage was added to its smithy end.

In 1952, these three buildings were combined in an eccentric if imaginative fashion into a single dwelling. Soon after, it was altered again, and treated and painted in such a way that it rather spoiled the elemental landscape of which it is a part and, felt our founder Jon Smith, spoiled the outlook from the farmstead across the road. When Arra Venton came on the market in 1988, he bought Arra Venton to protect the grouping as whole (something we would not be able to do today). Arra Venton was restored it to make it simple and unified again, looking out upon sea and wide moorland under the ever-changing west Cornish skies.

In 2024-4, alongside its new renewable energy heating system, Arra Venton was also fully refurbished. The kitchen units and the curved bay window were repaired and it was given a new loo on the first floor in a former housekeeper's cupboard.