

# The Landmark Trust

## **FRENCHMAN'S CREEK**

### **History Album**



**Written and Researched by Charlotte Haslam, 1990**

**Updated July 2007**

**Re-presented in 2015**

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## **BASIC DETAILS**

**Built soon after 1800**

**Lease acquired by Landmark 1987 from the National Trust**

**Architect for repairs: Peter Bird of Caroe and Martin**

**Builder: W. Lawry**

**Quantity Surveyor: Bare, Leaning and Bare**

**Consultant Engineer: John Mann**

**Finished and furnished 1990**

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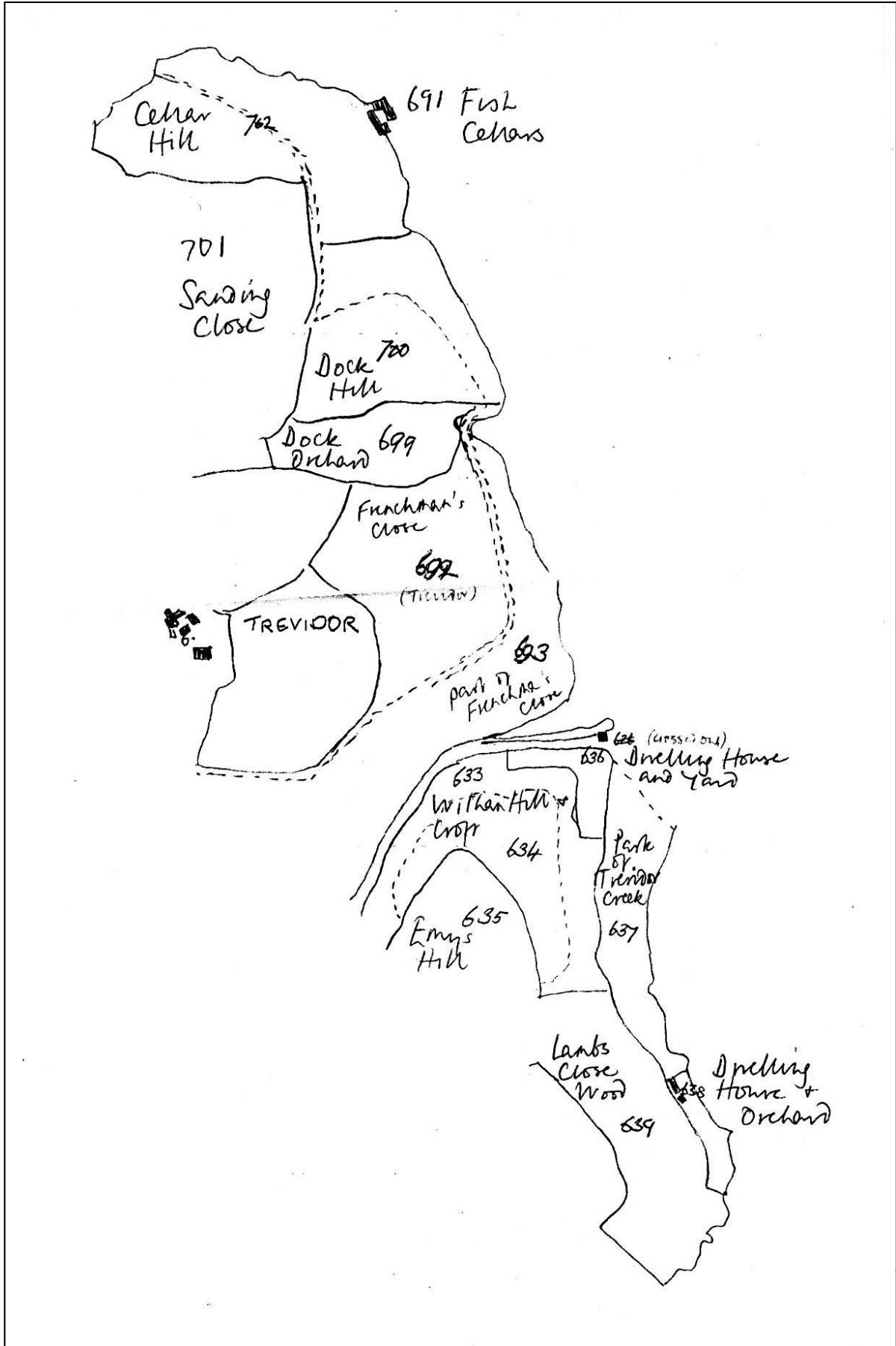


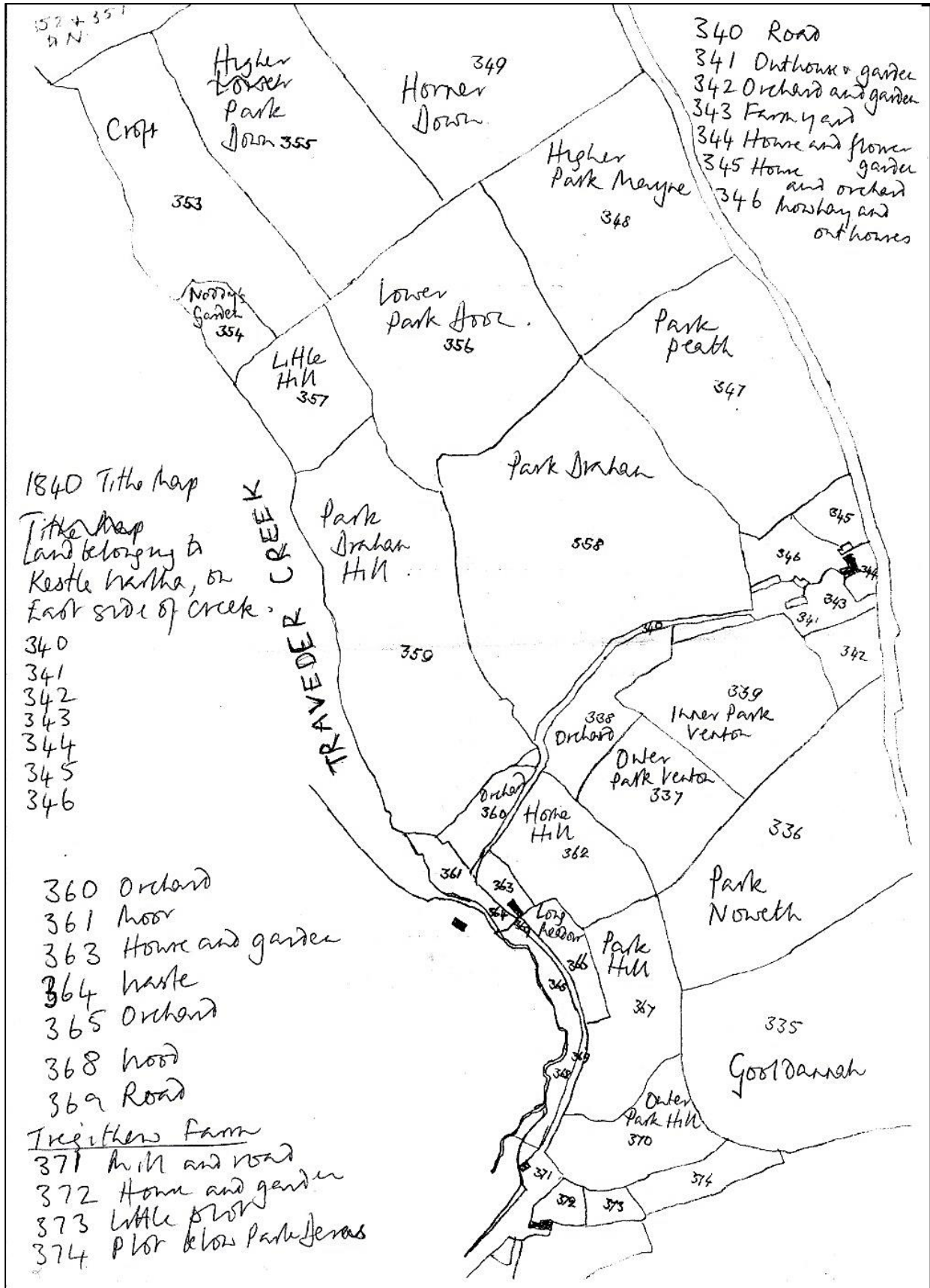
## Frenchman's Creek Cottage

Frenchman's Creek Cottage was probably built in the very early 19th century. It once formed part of a tiny settlement at the head of the creek, known as Frenchman's Pill - pill being the local word for a creek. Two cottages, one on either side of the stream, are shown on the first edition of the 1" Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1805. They appear more clearly, on a larger scale, on the Tithe Apportionment Map of 1840. On this, our cottage is shown as consisting of a House and Garden, and belongs to Kestle Wartha, the farm at the top of the hill. No occupier is listed, which indicates that it was in the direct tenancy of the farm, perhaps housing a farm servant as part of his wages.

The cottage on the other side of the stream, on the other hand, while belonging to Withan Farm, is listed as a House and Orchard in the occupancy of John Thomas and his family, presumably under a separate tenancy. It was common in Cornwall for labourers or miners to be granted a lease, based on the longest of three named lives, of a piece of land on which they would then build their own tiny house, generally of cob and thatch. John Thomas's cottage may have been of this kind, and it could be for this reason that it has vanished, while the more substantial one across the stream has survived.

The quality, and solid character, of this cottage is surprising, if it was indeed the cottage of a farm labourer. Even in the 1860s, agricultural writers were commenting on the poor housing of Cornish farm workers, and accusing farmers of spending more on their farm buildings than on the houses of the families who worked for them. A cottage of this type, with its separate parlour and kitchen, and its two bedrooms, is more the kind of house that was built, according to the writer A.K. Hamilton Jenkin in *Cornish Homes and Customs* (1934) by someone just above the rank of labourer, but below that of yeoman farmer. 'To this order belonged the mine "captain", the skipper of the little coasting vessel, or the foreman of one of the many small works and foundries which at that time (mid 19th century) flourished in the western part of the country.'





Tithe Apportionment Map of 1840

It would be easy to imagine such a person living at the head of Frenchman's Creek, perhaps owning his own small boat, and bringing his catch to the fish cellars at its mouth, shown on the Tithe Map as belonging to James Tremayne. Unfortunately the ten-yearly census returns, which are available for 1841-1881, contradict this impression. In these, our cottage does not appear at all. Under the parish of Manaccan, in which Kestle Wartha occurs, the household at the farm itself is listed, and so are three households at Tregithew (including the Mill) just to the south of the creek. But nothing at Frenchman's Pill. Turning instead to the parish of St Martin, on the west side of the creek, you certainly find Frenchman's Pill as a separate entry, after Trevidor and Withan Farms. But the only householder listed in 1841 is John Thomas, who on the evidence of the Tithe Map lived in the cottage on the other side of the stream. In the next three returns, there is still only one household listed at Frenchman's Pill, and always under St Martin, so this must always be the other cottage.

The first edition of the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1878, also puts Frenchman's Pill on the west bank, although both cottages are clearly marked. By this time another cottage further down the creek, shown in 1840, has disappeared, but there is still a landing place, known as Withan Quay.

It is unusual for any household to be missed by the census, but this does sometimes seem to happen when the house is that of a servant - there is a house on Trevidor Farm on the Tithe Map that does not feature in the Census, for example. The farmers at Kestle Wartha are always listed as employing at least one labourer in addition to domestic servants, and it must have been they who lived in the cottage on the creek. Unless, of course, it was lived in by a succession of mariners who, for reasons best known to themselves, chose to be absent, with their families, when the returning officer called.

## Inside the Cottage

The arrangement of cottages such as Frenchman's Creek varied extraordinarily little. From about the mid-18th century most had a roughly symmetrical front, with one or two windows on either side of a central front door. Inside, however, the older pattern of one small and one large downstairs room persisted; and in Cornwall the name for the grandest room was still the 'hale', deriving from the hall of the medieval house. By the 18th century, though, it was the parlour that was more important in terms of ceremony, and it was to this, rather than the communal kitchen, that the name 'hale' applied.

The central doorway opened directly into the large stone-flagged (or sometimes earth-floored) kitchen, in which were also the stairs to the upper floor. Only in grander houses would there be a division between staircase hall and kitchen. The parlour was generally to the right, and the kitchen to the left, with a great fireplace at its end. A.K. Hamilton-Jenkin, in *Cornish Homes and Customs* describes the furnishing of these compact and well-kept houses, and Frenchman's Creek is unlikely to have been very different:

The furniture of the 'hale' usually consisted of three chairs, sometimes painted and always carefully polished (though no one ever sat in them); an old-fashioned corner cupboard called the 'buffette', and an arm-chair. The centre of the room was occupied by a large 'growder- scrubbed' table. On the mantelpiece might be seen a copper kettle, a pair of 'cloamen' (china) dogs, a couple of tall brass candlesticks, and a 'jinny quick', or Italian irons for frilling old ladies caps. In the midst of these, occupying the place of honour, there generally stood or hung a figure or portrait of John Wesley.

The 'buffette' or corner cupboard was always an interesting piece of furniture....Inside was displayed the best china and glass....Cupboards in other parts of the room contained still further curios....The surrounding walls were commonly decorated with oleographs of the Bay of Naples. Illuminated texts from the New Testament also decked the walls in great abundance.



Altogether it was not without a sense of relief that the company returned to the kitchen which was the everyday living-room of the house, and the door closed upon the sumptuous but far less comfortable parlour. The kitchen also had its showpiece of furniture in the form of the dresser...carefully arranged according to fashion.

In most of the farms a long table occupied much of the available space in the kitchen. At meal-times the adults sat down to this on 'firms' (benches), whilst the children were placed in the low window seat opposite. On the other side of the kitchen, by the foot of the stairs leading to the rooms above, there commonly stood a large settle capable of seating three or four persons....The remaining furniture of the kitchen generally included a grandfather or a 'head and hinge' (ie Dutch) clock, a warming-pan, a hutch to hold half a sack of flour, various pitchers and paddicks for drinking water and, near the fire-place, a 'bellis' (bellows), salt box, and candle box.

In the kitchens of all the older houses, great or small, the fireplace invariably consisted of an open hearth. The opening was generally five or six feet wide, four or five deep, and somewhat more in height. The foundation of the hearth was raised about a foot higher than the floor of the room, and was constructed, like the side posts and 'cravel' (lintel), of great slabs of stone. On the right-hand side of this friendly cavern lay the 'ookener' (wood corner), in which was kept the day to day supply of furze and turf.

The fireplace lintel in our cottage is of timber, but it is easy to imagine the fire burning there all day, and the evening meal being cooked for the family, ready for their return from work.



## The Labourer's Day

Of one thing we can be sure, that the inhabitants of Frenchman's Creek worked very hard for their living. Once again, Hamilton-Jenkin is an abundant source of information. In recording the daily life of farm workers, he drew not only on his own conversations with old people, but also on the work of earlier writers. Thus, from the notebooks of J.C. Hoare, came the following account from an old woman:

My father was a skilled labourer earning 9s a week with a good cottage and garden, when I was a child in about 1850. We were allowed to keep two pigs to our own use, and also to gather as much faggot wood as we wanted from the hedges. Time was obtained to cut this by doing piecework, which began at 4 or 5 a.m.; the normal hours being from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

In 1867, the commissioners employed to look into the conditions of persons employed in agriculture reported that the average wages of a male labourer were 11 or 12 shillings a week, including perquisites, which might be a cottage, or a regular allowance of grain or potato meal instead of cash. Since this was barely enough to support a family, the women and children also took to the fields, particularly in times of depression such as the 1840s.

By 8 o'clock the women and children of the household had likewise found their way to the fields, where they were employed till six in the evening weeding corn, hewing turnips, picking stones, planting potatoes, rolling barley and oats, hay-making or reaping with the sickle. For such work the children from four or five years of age upwards received 3d or 4d a day, according to size or dexterity; and the women 6d or 8d.... Meanwhile the babies of the household had perforce to be left at home to fend for themselves with, at best, an older child to look after them. Small wonder under such circumstances that tragedies were frequent.

By 1867 fewer women were working, and those that did might expect to earn 7d or 8d a day, while the children earned between 4d and 6d. The commissioner's report contains evidence that children regularly started work at ten or eleven years old, and in some cases sooner:

Thomas Oliver, of Gulval, aged seven years, told the commissioners: 'I have been out putting down potatoes and got 4d a day, working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., half an hour being allowed for dinner.' Ellen Pierce (eleven years old), described by the schoolmaster of the same village as being very irregular in her attendance, stated in explanation: 'I have been out pulling radishes at 7d a day, the hours of work being from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. I go home to dinner from 12 to 1 o'clock. The older girls go away early from morning school to cook or carry dinner for their mothers [working] in the gardens. In my cottage we have one kitchen, one bedroom, and a dairy. Mother, aunt, grandmother and myself live there together.

The schoolmaster had little hope of winning in such circumstances, though as the century progressed, and the Education Acts came into effect, the census returns reflect some intention for younger children, at least, to attend school, listing them hopefully as Scholars. Once past the age of twelve or so, the great majority left any sort of schooling behind them, and many moved away from home altogether:

In large families the older boys and girls were almost invariably sent into farm service in order 'to save their meat.' Wages being nominal and luxuries not expected in the way of food, even the small farmer found it a paying proposition to take a number of such children into his household. The girls would be employed in assisting the farmer's wife with her household chores, and in attending to the pigs, calves and poultry; while the boys were generally set to driving horses or oxen at the plough.

This solution to overcrowding in tiny cottages is again born out in the census returns, where many farm households include servants of between twelve and sixteen years old.

If the whole family had to go out to work, that still left the household duties to be done on their return - cooking, baking, sewing, fetching water and firewood, and tending their own small gardens:

During the busy seasons of the year, indeed, the men would often contrive to cultivate their gardens by moonlight, whilst within the cottage the womenfolk were 'catching up' their various chores which had to be done in readiness for the next day's toil, which started with the dawn.

In many cases, however, especially in more prosperous times, the wife, or an elder daughter or grandmother, would spend the day at home, caring for the garden, the pig or the poultry, busy in the dairy and scullery, or with the cooking. In West Cornwall this was all done on the open fire, and keeping this alight was itself an art which required much practice:

Until almost the end of the last century many Cornish houses knew no other fuel than that which came to them from within a short distance of their own doors. In one or two instances these turf fires are said to have been actually kept alive for a hundred years, faithfully serving the needs of the inhabitants from birth to death. Each night, the embers were banked up before going to bed, and the kettle hooked on to the cross-bar in the chimney. On coming down the next morning the water was always boiling, whilst sufficient fire still remained to fry the bacon and mashed potatoes for breakfast. After the meal the hearth was swept clean, fresh turf was put on, and so the old fire entered on another day of service and companionship to the household.

With the aid of such fires as these the Cornish housewife contrived to do all the cooking for the largest family, asking nothing more than a 'kettle' for baking and a 'crock' for boiling. The kettle, it should be explained, in no way resembled the ordinary utensil of that name (which was distinguished in Cornwall by being termed a 'tay (tea) kettle'), but was simply an iron bowl with three legs capable of being stood on the ground like a small crock. Whenever baking was to be done, the 'brandis' or heavy iron trivet was first drawn forward into the centre of the hearth and on it was placed a round sheet of iron, known as the 'baking ire.' The smouldering embers were raked round the brandis and under the baking iron, and were fanned into flame with the 'bellis' (bellows). As soon as the baking iron had been heated in this way to the proper temperature it was taken off the brandis, carefully wiped and greased, and replaced on the hearth. On to it the bread or other food was then laid and covered by the inverted kettle. Hot embers were raked around, and a fire of furze and 'bruss' (dried hedge gatherings etc) built up over the whole. Beneath this the bread, protected from all dirt and ash, was left to cook for about an hour and a half, at the end of which time the embers were removed, the kettle lifted off, and there was the loaf baked to perfection! All sorts of dishes - heavy-cakes, pasties and pies - were prepared in the same way. For boiling and stewing the crock was used, either placed on the brandis or hung from a cross-bar in the chimney.

The methods employed in cooking on the open hearth required both skill and experience; there was a 'knick' in them, as the old people used to say. In addition to the art of regulating the fire, there was also the difficulty of ascertaining how the food progressed beneath the pile of embers.

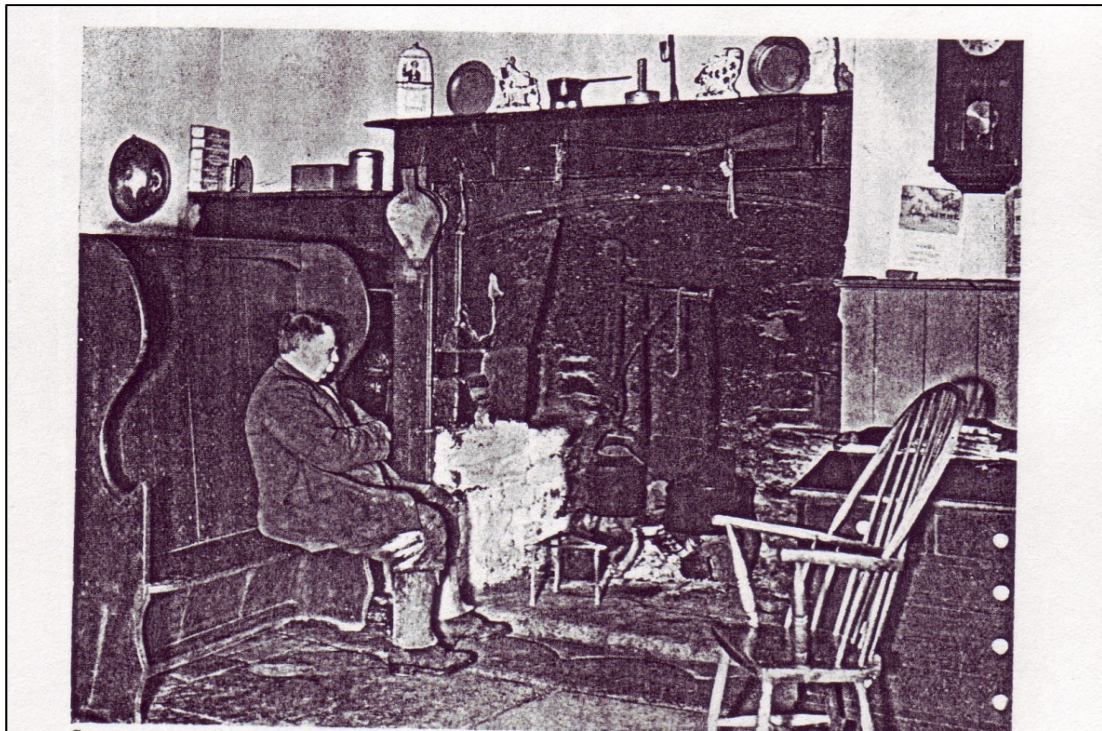




See page 29

By kind permission of Mrs. J. Toullec

OXEN AT WORK NEAR MEVAGISSEY



See page 58

W. G. Sandy, Truro

THE OPEN HEARTH OF AN OLD CORNISH KITCHEN

Illustration from A.K. Hamilton Jenkin *Cornish Homes and Customs*



Notwithstanding these drawbacks, all those who have tasted food cooked in this manner agree that no modern oven can ever compare with 'baking under.' For everyone, wet, tired or simply hungry, the end of the day came at last:

In the evenings when the men had come in from their work, the water had been boiled and the tea been made, the housewife would lay on the red-hot embers two or three 'tashes' of furze, and onto this an apron- full of bruss. Next came several handfuls of 'stubbins' or 'stogs' (tough, slow-burning roots of furze, etc.) and over the whole a complete covering of turfs. A fire thus built would last without further attention for hours, burning with a slow dull heat which kept the family warm and comfortable without being 'scroached.' Seated around such a fire on a winter's night, with the chimney stool in its proper corner, close to the warmth but clear of the smoke, and the high-backed settle brought round in front of the hearth, what snigger or happier place could be found in all Christendom than an old-fashioned Cornish kitchen?

It is true that there was work for all even here, since the old people could rarely afford to be idle. But whilst hands were busy, spinning or carding wool, picking 'smuts' from a pile of grain, stripping goose feathers, making brimstone matches or other similar tasks, tongues kept pace with them, and gossip and songs and fine old folk-tales whiled away the hours till at length nodding heads and sleepy eyes proclaimed that the time had come for 'Men to bed, dogs to door, and maidens to rake out the ashes.'

## The name of the house

The first question, of course, is why Frenchman's? J.E.B. Gover in his *Place Names of Cornwall* (Vol V) offers no theories at all, just noting its existence. Nor does the Cornish historian Charles Henderson, who covers most of the county in his copious notebooks, now in the library of the Royal Institution of Cornwall in Truro. The Institute of Cornish Studies in a letter to Brian Le Mesurier, author of the National Trust's *Helford River* guide, had little to offer either, except to add that the word 'Frenchman' meaning a French ship or man-of-war, occurs in the English language from the 15th century.

Certainly raids from French ships were a common enough occurrence along the Cornish and Devon coasts, even into the 19th century. I.T. Tregellas in *Peeps into the Haunts and Homes of the Rural Population of Cornwall* (1879) tells a story of an old woman whose response to any information was to say 'Ah, I towld ee how 'twud be', whether the news was mundane, or something more sensational, such as 'The French comed into Fa'mouth harbour, and tooked waun ship out weth um, laest night.'

It is possible that the origins of the name lie not on the water, but the banks. On the Tithe Map of 1841 the creek itself is called Treveder Creek, after the farm (Trevidor) on its western bank. But a field half way up, also on the west bank, is called Frenchman's Close. Perhaps this refers to a former tenant - just as on the opposite bank there is a small field called Noddy's garden.

On the other hand, the census return for 1841 lists John Thomas's cottage as Frenchman's Pill, and this is unlikely to be a new name. Pill and Creek are interchangeable, so it would follow that the creek itself also bore the name at that time in common parlance, as well as that of Trevidor. There is no knowing whether field or creek came first.

This census return of 1841 is the earliest instance of the name. The earlier maps, being smaller in scale, do not distinguish the creek at all, and no mention has yet been found in the accounts of early historians or travellers. Daphne du Maurier's guess, in fact, is as good as anyone's.

### Kestle Wartha

Kestle Wartha means Upper Kestle, as distinct from the Kestle on the other side of the road. The name derives from an early British castle or earthwork fortification sited nearby, so a settlement is likely to have existed there from the earliest Middle Ages or before. The first documentary reference to it is in 1288. By the later Middle Ages it had developed into the Manor of Kestle and Cruplight, which incorporated land in several of the neighbouring parishes. From it the de Kestell family took their name, and there they had their manor house, though probably at Kestle Farm, rather than Kestle Wartha.

The last male heir of the Kestle family died in the mid 18th century, leaving his property to a daughter, who married a Penrose and then a Vyvyan, a cousin of the Trelowarren family whose estate runs up the west bank of Frenchman's Creek. Her descendants sold the Manor in 1796 to Sir William Lemon of Carclew, whose family remained the landowner there throughout the 19th century, and into the 20th, by which time they had become Tremaynes.

In 1779, however, Kestle Wartha had been leased for 99 years to James Caddy of St Martin in Meneage and Manaccan, variously described as yeoman and mariner. It must be a descendant of his who is listed as the owner in the Tithe Apportionment of 1840, while Benjamin Trerice is the tenant. The James Caddy of 1840, however, has come up in the world, being described as Esquire. A number of different occupiers or tenants are given in the Census Returns for the 19th century. At the end of the lease the farm seems to have reverted to the

Carclew estate, because land along Frenchman's Creek belonged to the Tremaynes in 1920, at which time they sold it, and presumably Kestle Wartha as well.



*Cuckoo Cottage*

## Recent Owners

For the first half of the 20th century, Frenchman's Creek Cottage still belonged to Kestle Wartha, and for most of that time was let as a labourer's cottage. The Edwardian lady who was sometimes seen there must have been one of their wives. Then, for two or three years before the Second World War, it was let to more exotic tenants. In her evocative and somewhat mannered book, *The Helford River* (1956), C.C. Vyvyan describes how she and her friend, Maria Pendragon, rented the whitewashed cottage at the head of the creek, 'for picnics, day pleasures and lending to our friends.' They called it Cuckoo Cottage, and furnished it with old stools and chintz and upholstered hip-baths. Her description of their expeditions there, and of the refreshment it gave to its visitors, before they were all engulfed by war, should be read in full, but one passage sums up the quality that it had for them:

Sometimes Maria and I would meet there in the winter, she arriving by boat and I on foot, and we would sit over the fire talking at leisure about this world and many others. Or I would go down there alone, kindle a fire, settle myself in a hip-bath with a book or two beside me and enjoy complete solitude. Often, instead of reading, I would sit gazing out of the window at that wall of trees rising to the sky and feeling the quiet of that place as if it were soft music.

After the War the cottage is said to have been let to a teacher, who kept a pig in the traditional fashion. Then, in 1955 the cottage was sold to Mr and Mrs Hooper, who moved their belongings there by a combination of a coal lorry and an oyster boat. Their daughter, Susan, grew up on the creek, and in 1983 the cottage was given to her. The National Trust by then owned much of the east bank, and when it transpired that its owner was able to use it less and less frequently, so that it grew more and more derelict and vandalised, they suggested to Landmark a joint scheme for its acquisition and use. Accordingly it was acquired by the National Trust in 1987, and leased to Landmark shortly afterwards.



The following photographs were taken in 1988 before restoration.



**Before restoration in 1988**





1988





1988





1988





1988







1988





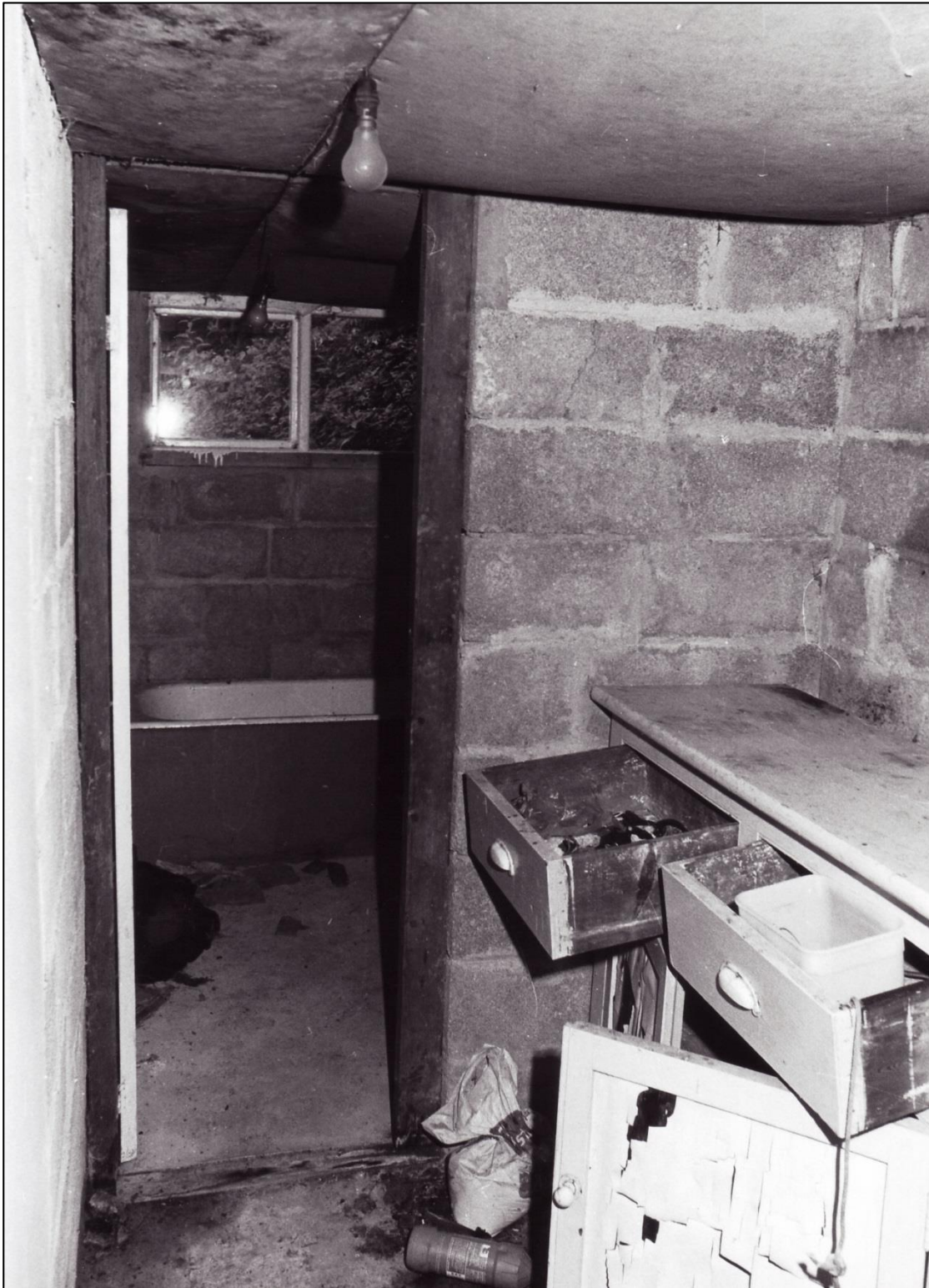


1988



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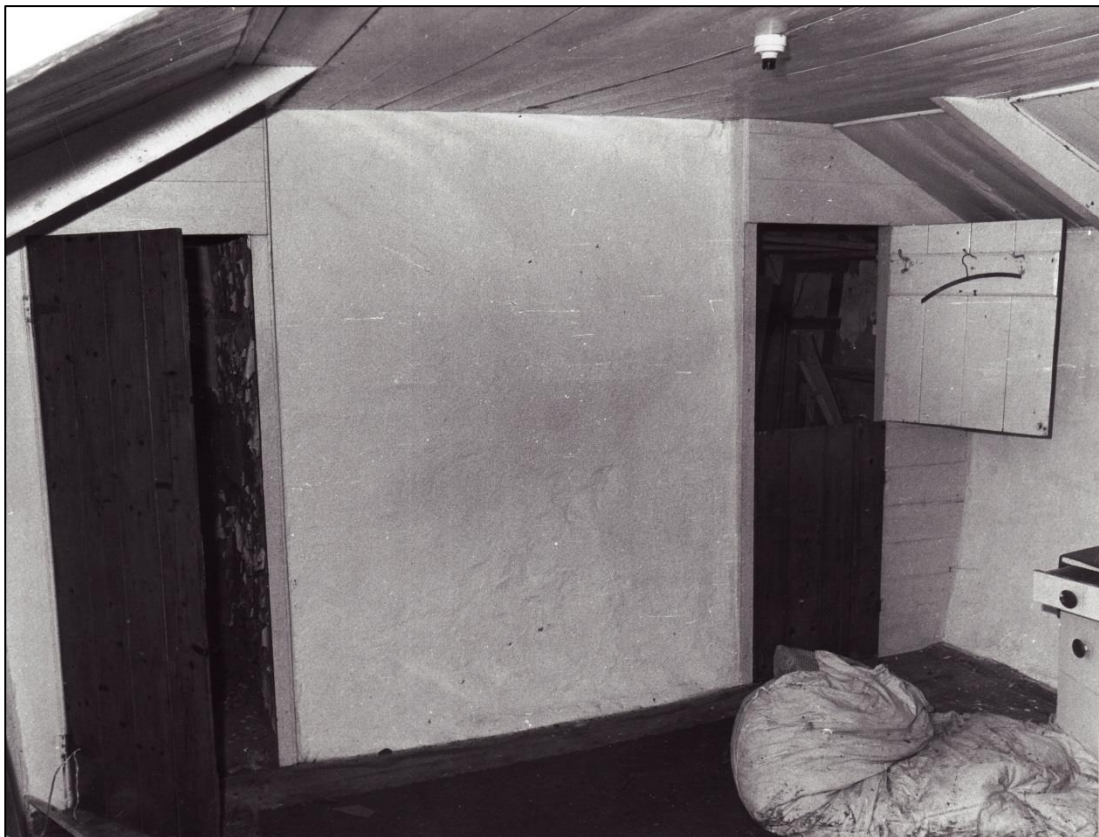




1988



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## Repair of the Cottage

The first discovery made when we started to examine the cottage was that it was much less solid than it appeared to be. The stone front wall was sound, and just needed some repointing, but the back and gable walls were very shaky indeed. The North gable, which is also built of stone, was bulging badly, and had to be partly taken down and rebuilt, chimney-breast and all. The chimney itself was missing; instead, a metal flue had been fixed to the exterior of the wall. The new brick chimney had to be especially tall, to persuade the fire to draw in the sheltered valley bottom. Two windows were inserted in this wall at the same time, to give a view down the creek: the only alteration made to the appearance of the cottage.

The problem with the South gable, on the other hand, was that a large part of it is cob, or rammed earth, including the flue from the fireplace in the (present) kitchen. Much of this was crumbling away, due to lack of maintenance, and had to be carefully repaired, using a vernacular mixture of lime plaster and masonry, or slate stitches. The flue was actually formed within the cob itself, the builders simply leaving a vent as they constructed the wall. This has now been reinforced, to stabilise the wall, with a new brick chimney on its top, a pair to that on the North gable.

Even worse problems were encountered with the back wall. Here there was the same mixture of rubble masonry and cob, also in need of repair. But it then turned out, when digging away the ground at the back to create a dry area, that the lower part of the wall did not exist at all; the house was simply built against, and on top of, the shale bedrock. In addition to this, the whole house was moving gently down the hill, leaving the back wall behind it. To remedy this, ties were inserted to secure the back wall to the gables, and the corners rebuilt, to stitch the whole building firmly together. When the trench was excavated, the shale forming the lower part of the back wall was simply left freestanding, but



**Reinforcing the back wall**

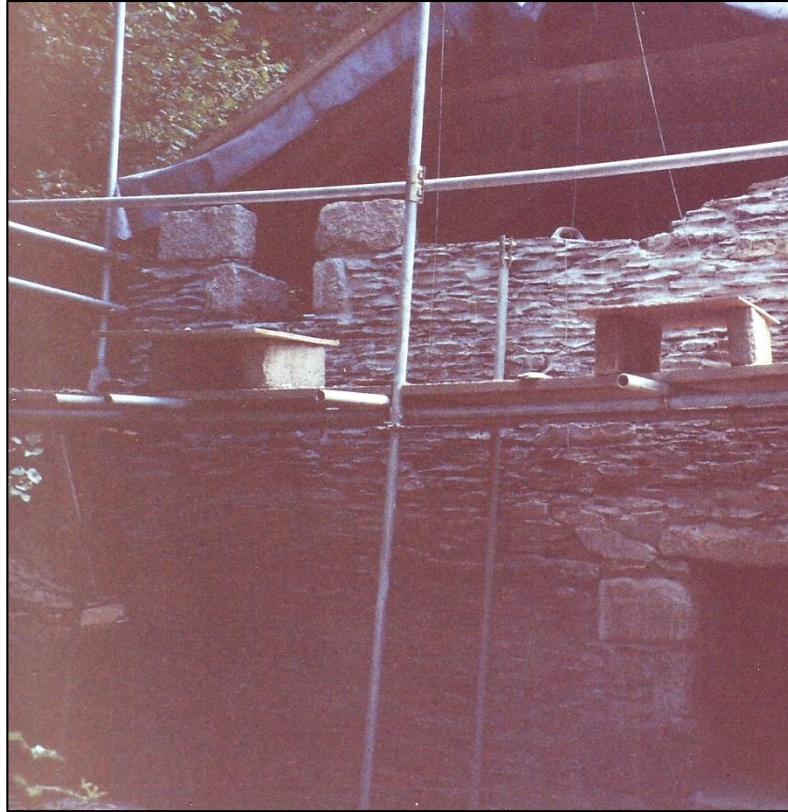
extensively reinforced. The trench itself, meanwhile, was stabilised by building a retaining wall on its uphill side. There was already a wing at the back, containing a bathroom, but it was built of a very wobbly single skin of breezeblocks, and was planted directly on the bank behind, part of which was now dug away. The wing was entirely rebuilt, therefore, elegantly bridging the trench, and with an outer stone skin, as well as an inner blockwork one.

The roof had been renewed by the last owners, using concrete tiles. These were not only unattractive, but their weight was causing the roof to spread, pushing out the walls. To prevent this getting any worse, a ring beam was inserted running right round the building at eaves level. Then, when the roof structure had been repaired, new Delabole slates, from North Cornwall, were laid in diminishing courses, secured with lime mortar in the local manner, known as 'scantle' roofing; and with new clay ridge tiles. At the same time, the gutters and downpipes were removed. In such a wooded place, these would always be getting blocked, and it is preferable just to let water drain away over the whole area of the roof.

The front door and the windows at the front of the cottage were all repaired, and the new windows made to the same design. Inside, again, all the joinery was repaired, rather than renewed - partitions, stairs, and upper floor. Downstairs, there had formerly been a slate floor, but this had been replaced in cement. A new floor of Trebarwith slate was laid throughout.

When rebuilding the North gable wall, the fireplace in what is now the sitting room (but which was the kitchen) was also rebuilt, reusing the oak lintel and granite quoins, but with a slightly smaller opening, to leave room for the new window beside it. The back wall of the fireplace had vertical crazy paving applied to it, which it was not thought necessary to replace.





Rebuilding the gable walls



A more fundamental alteration than the insertion of a new window is perhaps the reversal of the traditional room plan, with its small, seldom-used parlour, and its large, much lived-in kitchen. We wanted the larger room to remain the one in which our visitors would spend more time, and judged that here, it was more likely to be true of a sitting room, than a kitchen.

A major part of the work at Frenchman's Creek consisted in the now invisible introduction of services. The existing water supply came from the stream, a makeshift arrangement that was no longer safe, nor reliable. Mains water had therefore to be laid on, brought from the top of the hill. Electricity also had to come from the top of the hill, with cables laid underground and out of sight. Finally, for anybody to reach the cottage at all by car, the rough access track had to be improved, but not excessively. The two wheel tracks of cement, mixed with coarse granite chippings to darken its colour, seemed the most acceptable solution.

Immediately round the cottage, as little as possible was done to upset its extraordinary setting. A portable cabin, erected by the last owners, was taken down, and a small amount of clearing and grass-planting was carried out, to keep the undergrowth a little further away. A concrete path round the front and sides of the house was removed, and granite paving laid instead, with french drains beneath. Finally the whole house was re-lime-washed, so that it once again gleams through the trees, as it did when Clara Vyvyan first saw it in the 1920s.





**The site workshop**



**Repairs to the partition on the ground floor**