

The Landmark Trust

FRENCHMAN'S CREEK, HELFORD, CORNWALL

Frenchman's Creek Cottage was probably built in the very early 19th century. It was originally 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 much more clearly on the Tithe Apportionment Map of 1840 because it is to a much larger scale. In this 1840 map our cottage is shown as consisting of a house and garden and belonging 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, by someone just above the rank of labourer, but below that of yeoman farmer: someone like a mine "captain", or skipper of a little coasting vessel, or foreman of one of the many small works and foundries which flourished in the mid-19th century in Cornwall.

The cottage is missing from subsequent censuses, which is unusual, but does sometimes seem to happen when the house is that of a servant. 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 this 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.

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 if now 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.

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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 the 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.

Restoration

The cottage needed a lot of work. The north gable was bulging badly and had to be partly taken down and rebuilt, chimney-breast and all. The chimney itself was missing and 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 and this was the only alteration made to the appearance of the cottage.

The south gable is largely cob, or rammed earth, including the flue from the fireplace in the (present) kitchen. This was crumbling away 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. The lower part of the rear wall was found not to exist at all; the house was simply built against and on top of the shale bedrock and was moving gently down the hill, leaving the back wall behind it. To remedy this, ties were inserted to tie the back wall to the gables and the corners were rebuilt, to stitch the whole building firmly together. The wing at the back, containing a bathroom, was built of a very wobbly single skin of breezeblocks and so was entirely rebuilt. The roof of concrete tiles was causing the roof to spread, so a ring beam was inserted running round the building at eaves level. Then new Delabole slates from North Cornwall were laid in diminishing courses, secured with lime mortar with new clay ridge tiles. The front door and windows were all repaired and internally, partitions, stairs and upper floor were all repaired. Downstairs, a new floor of Trebarwith slate was reinstated to a later cement screed. Finally, the whole house was lime-washed so that it once again gleams through the trees, just as it did when Clara Vyvyan first saw it in the 1920s.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Frenchman's Creek sleeps up to 4 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk