

## RHIWDDOLION, NR. BETWS-Y-COED, GWYNEDD

At least until late medieval times, the upper Conway valley was inaccessible, sparsely inhabited, and plagued by lawless bands who found the oak forests a useful hideout. But with the arrival of peace came the desire for permanent homes, so that many of the earliest houses in the district date from the 16th century. These are often found in small upland pockets of fertile land, watered by a stream, where they lie sheltered and hidden.

Of the three Landmarks in the Rhiwddolion valley, Ty Uchaf ('Upper House') is the oldest; on the evidence of a datestone surviving in the ruined pigsty, it was built in 1685. It is typical of its time: single-storeyed, with an end chimney, and two main rooms with extra sleeping space provided in a loft which originally extended over two-thirds of the cottage (the *croglofft*), accessed by a ladder. The room to the right of the door, with the big fireplace, would have been the principal living and cooking room, and the smaller, unheated one on the left either a service bay or a primitive parlour; the two rooms were originally separated by a partition. The byre beside the house was probably added in the late 18th century, and may have replaced an earlier structure – the farm would always have required at least one building to act as cow byre, stable and hayloft. The house roof would have been thatched, but it is possible that the byre was slated from the first, and that the house section was re-roofed in slate at the time that the byre was added on.

The roofless structures at either end of the house-and-byre range are 19th-century additions: the one on the left seems to have served as a store, and that on the right may have been a dairy or brewhouse. The dry-stone walls in front of the house, and the now-ruined pigsty, are of about the same date. Various pens, enclosures and other structures, some now only identifiable as footings, can be seen near the house; of these, the only other roofed structure is the *ty bach* (little house), which is probably late Victorian.

The name Ty Coch means "red house", though there is no obvious reason for this; it may, in a general way, mean "warm", from the hospitality offered there, or it may be derived from the less cold colour of the stone compared with dressed slate slabs, or perhaps it had a red front door. It is probably a hundred years or so younger than Ty Uchaf, being built before the end of the 18th century. It seems however that it may incorporate the materials of an earlier structure, since it contains a cruck, formed from the trunk and branch of a single tree, spanning the fireplace. The structure may have been a barn, since cruck trusses continued to be used in agricultural buildings well after their use in domestic buildings had been abandoned. In its original layout, Ty Coch was not very dissimilar to Ty Uchaf, and once had a similar sleeping loft.

For centuries the pattern of farming life continued almost unchanged, but the revival in the area of lead mining and then of slate quarrying on an industrial scale transformed the valley. A row of miners' cottages was built on Sarn Helen (the old Roman Road, named after the Welsh mother of Roman Emperor Constantine, or perhaps after the Welsh princess Helen Luddyddawc – the origins are lost in the mists of time). In 1860 a school and a chapel were provided. In 1869 the Bard Griffith Hugh Jones became headmaster, and for the next 50 years the district was enlivened by his brass band, his choral union and his Eisteddfodau. The chapel choirs sang hymns of his composition, and the Rhiwddolion chapel, sensationally, acquired a harmonium to accompany them. In 1892 Ty Capel was enlarged, and an open-air auditorium built alongside for special occasions.

## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

By the early part of the 20th century the mines and quarries had closed, and employment possibilities declined. The few remaining villagers of Rhiwddolion, finding the Roman road of little use to them and the whole hamlet out on a limb, slipped away. The chapel was closed in 1956, and the Landmark Trust bought it in 1967. Ty Coch continued to be lived in after the quarrymen's cottages had lost their roofs, but it became increasingly marooned from modern life and in 1968 it was also sold to the Landmark Trust. Ty Uchaf came into the hands of the Trust in 1998, acquired in order to preserve this unspoilt setting.

The previous owner had already begun a restoration of Ty Uchaf, of which various traces still remain. Its conversion to a Landmark took place under the guidance of architect Adam Voelker and was carried out by the Trust's own workforce, headed by Reg Lo Vel, who has worked on many of the Trust's renovations. It is a soft and conservative restoration, faithful to the original simple plan form of house and byre, and to the evidence of the *croglofft*.

Ty Capel, on the other hand, was in sound structural condition when the Landmark Trust bought it and obtained permission to turn it into a dwelling house. To give extra light to the big room a new window was made in the south wall, after which the slates were re-hung on the end, exactly as before. The kitchen and bathroom were fitted in at the other end, leaving plenty of space over for the sleeping gallery. The altar rails, originally at the south end with the Communion Table behind, were used to form the balustrade. The deal floorboards and the boards that line the walls and ceiling are all original and the varnished pine partitions, though new, are absolutely typical of chapel furniture. The simple colouring, and the stencilling round the dado rail, are also designed to be in keeping with the decoration of a small chapel, and the architect, the late Leonard Beddall-Smith, aimed to ensure that the feel of the whole building is highly evocative.

Ty Coch needed rather more work. The roof was in a bad state and had to be completely redone. Luckily there were some slates to be used up from the original roof of another Landmark, the Bath Tower in Caernarfon; they are the large ones on the front of the building. There was no room to fit a kitchen and bathroom into the existing building, so they were added on at the back. The stones for the extension came from a field next to Ty Uchaf and were given to us by the neighbouring farmer of Ty Mawr. The local joiner designed and built the kitchen cupboards, and local slate flags were laid on the sitting-room floor. A low wall was built at the front, and the hillside dug back behind to help prevent damp.

So after all, the activity of the 19th century in this valley turned out to be no more than an interruption; Rhiwddolion has returned to its original pattern and the same simple sort of life can again be lived there, if a good deal more comfortably. The lack of a road to the front door emphasises the link with the past, for there can be few places left where the foot-boundness of that life can be so strongly realised. Above all, it looks today very much as it did for some hundreds of years before the quarries came and went, an upland pocket of habitation among the now encroaching conifers – which in time may themselves prove no more than an interruption in the natural landscape.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Ty Capel sleeps up to 3 people, Ty Coch up to 4 and Ty Uchaf up to 2 people. To book a Rhiwddolion building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*