

# The Landmark Trust

## LOWER PORTHMEOR, CORNWALL

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. It is also among the most attractive of all the groups of buildings along a visually staggering 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 much as it is 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 and associated cow-houses and other agricultural buildings.

Houses of the 8th or 9th century excavated at Mawgan Porth near Newquay were found to have been of this kind, although there the walls were constructed in much the same manner as Cornish hedges - two skins of stone, with packed clay or earth between. Sometimes there was a sleeping loft, sometimes the dwellings 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 later rebuilt, unless they were 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 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 have one of these huge projecting chimneypieces, and they occur in most of the other farms along the coast. Matthews in 1892 remarked of

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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.'

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.

Lower Porthmeor also 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 Talland 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 to stay with the Berrymans at Lower Porthmeor, aged 28, in 1910. With Jean Thomas, her carer-companion, she went for long walks over the moors. Virginia Woolf's later novels *The Voyage Out* (1915), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941) all draw directly from her memories of Cornwall.

## **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 Landmark's founder, spoilt the outlook from the farmsteads across the road. So when it came on the market, Landmark bought Arra Venton to protect the Lower Porthmeor grouping as whole (we would not be able to do so today). It was restored to make it simple and unified again, looking out upon sea and wide moorland under the ever-changing Cornish skies.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Arra Venton sleeps up to 5 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*