

# The Landmark Trust

## CHURCH COTTAGE, LLANDYGWYDD, CARDIGANSHIRE

Church Cottage has a special place in the history of the Landmark Trust as well as Llandygydd's, as it was the very first building Landmark took on. In 1965, John Smith had the idea of setting up a charitable trust to rescue buildings in distress and then offering them for holidays to secure their future maintenance. He discussed his idea with architect Leonard Bedall Smith of Llangoedmon, who was able to suggest some candidates from his own local patch. One of them was the abandoned cottage beside the church at Llandygydd, and from here sprang the Landmark Trust which, more than forty years on, has almost 200 buildings in its care across England, Scotland and Wales.

The cottage was built in the late 1850s to house a caretaker and sexton for the imposing St Tygwydd's Church, designed by R J Withers in 1857 (Withers also designed the two school houses in the village). John Smith's prescience in stepping in to ensure the cottage's survival was emphasised in melancholy fashion in 2000, when the church itself was demolished. It was at least the third church on the site and the dedication to Celtic St Tygwydd's suggests that Christianity took root here in the earliest times and before St Augustine's mission from Rome in AD 597. Historians disagree about St Tygwydd's exact identity and even whether s/he was male or female. Tygwydd was either the daughter of Tegyd and the wife of St Cunedda Wledyg, (chroniclers tell us that she lived in the early 5th century and was killed in Gwent by the Saxons) – or he was St Tyfriog's brother, with nothing else known except that his feast was variously placed on 13th or 18th January. (St Tyfriog has left traces in both Brittany and Cornwall and may have had Romano-British, pagan origins).

So we may probably imagine a small, barn-like church in Llandygydd from very early times. Certainly there was a church here in the years before the Reformation, since a mediaeval calling bell has survived until the present day. The font, too, is unusual in being a fine example of 15th-century stonemason's craft (in Cardiganshire, almost all early fonts are of Norman origin). According to Meyrick, a new church had also been built as recently as 1803 "in a neat, elegant manner for the small sum of three hundred pounds." This was not considered good enough by the evangelical Ecclesiologists, a group of earnest mid-Victorian Anglicans whose mission was to 'improve' both the architecture and seating capacity of the Established Church after a long period of neglect that had seen the rise of Nonconformity in Wales and elsewhere. Their aim was to reintroduce the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages as the only fit architectural style for ecclesiastical buildings. This Gothic Revival was one of the most important movements in Victorian architecture and religious life, and soon spread to buildings of all kinds, even finding echoes in the little caretaker's cottage and schoolhouses at Llandygydd.

From an early illustration, the church built in 1803 was a modest chapel and porch, well built of the local stone with a turret to house the calling bell and font. Sixty years later, The Church Builder described it as having been 'if not waste and desolate, at least mean, neglected and unsightly...All within and without seemed to say it was the least cared for house in the village.' Money was raised, and Somerset-born Robert Jewell Withers was brought in to design a replacement in the Early English style of the 13th century. Withers was to design many such Gothic churches and municipal buildings. For St Tygwydd's, he designed a tower with a 130 foot wooden spire covered in lead, which local anecdote says was deliberately built to be of a height to be seen from the seats of the four local landowners who were the main subscribers. A peel of six bells was also installed, but this tower and its spire were to prove the church's undoing.

By 1913, the spire was so unstable that it had to be taken down, and the tower was given crenellations instead. The stone tower survived until 1981, but its weight so de-stabilised the corner of the church that in due course it too had to be taken down. The cottage continued to be lived in until the 1960s, its last inhabitants Alvan Martin, who was church warden, and his wife Elizabeth, who cleaned the church.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW  
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)

Structural problems continued however, and in 1996 the church, faced with a repairs bill of some £300,000, also had to be closed. It was finally demolished in 2000, its footprint and lonely font the only remains of the ecclesiologists' ambitious project. The faithful mediaeval calling bell now hangs outside 'new' St Tygwydd's at the bottom of the lane, where the best of the Victorian glass has also been moved. To all this Church Cottage has borne silent witness, its own future secure. For all the Victorians' overweening confidence, it is perhaps ironic that Established worship in Llandygydd today continues quietly in a building of a scale and form much closer to its earlier churches.

## **RESTORATION OF CHURCH COTTAGE**

When Landmark bought Church Cottage from the Representative Body for the Church in Wales, it had stood empty and derelict for a number of years. It was then a very dilapidated two-up, two-down cottage with a rickety staircase and no bathroom. The kitchen and a lavatory were in lean-to sheds at the back. It was virtually built into the bank at the rear, which was causing serious damp problems especially on the west wall. Surrounded by glebe land, access to the cottage was then across the stream beyond the present garden.

First the site was cleared and the lean-tos demolished. The same team excavated the bank at the back (a laborious process once they hit rock within) and lowered the ground level inside and outside the cottage. They also stripped the plaster from the walls and ceilings and mostly demolished the chimney stack and end wall. In March 1966, builders Messrs. Row n of Cilgerran started work. An extension was added in local materials, which now houses the kitchen, stairs and bathroom. The west wall and chimney stack were rebuilt, the chimney stack and front of the kitchen being refaced with sawn stone rejected from the Cilgerran quarry, thrown aside a great many years ago when the quarry was working. Such thrift informed much of the work done on the cottage: the stone for the repairs to the rear wall came from Mr Beddall Smith's own stables, which he was in the process of demolishing.

Preseli slates from the architect's stables were also used for the front roof slopes, while slates salvaged from Blaen Pant were used at the back, bought for 2s 6d each from Mrs James of Blaen Pant. After stripping, sorting and carriage to Church Cottage, 'the total cost comes to much the same as buying new,' reported the architect, 'but the old slates look nicer.' New window and door frames were put in and floors, beams and staircase renewed in oak. Leonard Beddall Smith designed the quatrefoil device for the window heads, writing that 'The joiners in these parts are accustomed to carving elaborate chairs for the bards for the eisteddfodau and carving will be no problem.' Suitable mantelpieces were installed in sitting room and bedroom; a larder was made under the stairs and a back porch built up to and incorporating the outbuilding. The suitably Gothic front door was added. A paved space was laid between the cottage and outbuilding, with terrace and ha-ha beyond and the vicar agreed to a new access off the main road. After an advert in the Sunday Times and the first visitors began their holiday in Church Cottage on May 27th, 1967. It has been a popular Landmark ever since, and from these modest beginnings, the Landmark Trust was duly launched.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Church Cottage sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*