

# The Landmark Trust

## **DOLBELYDR, TREFNANT, DENBIGHSHIRE**

Dolbelydr is to be treasured on two main counts. It is a fine example of a 16th-century, stone-built manor house, which has survived remarkably unaltered. It was also where Henry Salesbury (1561-c 1605), physician and humanist scholar, wrote his *Grammatica Britannica*, published in 1593. The *Grammatica* was one of the first attempts to impose formal grammar on the Welsh language. Little is known of Henry Salesbury's life, although it seems likely that he was related to the Salesbury family, one of the most powerful and wealthy in 16th-century Denbighshire.

Dolbelydr, in the parish of Cefn Meiriadog, would originally have been a house of considerable status, built of well-dressed limestone and with tall chimneys. Analysis of the timbers dates its construction to c.1578 and for this date its plan is transitional. The end chimneys and primary spiral staircase would have been considered innovatory, as would the rectangular entrance hall with its plank and muntin screen (rather than the more usual cross passage arrangement). Dolbelydr gradually declined in status through the years and underwent various alterations. It stood empty from around 1912.

Landmark first visited Dolbelydr in 1982. Its significance as one of Wales' 'lost houses' had long been recognised but the main obstacle to acquiring it was lack of access – during the latter part of its history the house was often approached on stilts from the opposite side of the River Elwy! We were grateful to Mr. Roberts, the farmer on whose land it stands, to agreeing finally to sell us the building and an access track to it in 1999. This acquisition was directly enabled by a generous bequest by Dorothy Stroud. By the time we acquired the house, the roof had fallen in. A later bread oven and external staircase had reduced to rubble and the solar screen on the first floor had been removed to a house in Chester, where it remains today. We installed emergency scaffolding at once, although it was another two years before we had raised the necessary money for its restoration.

Our initial view was that this was a very interesting vernacular building, special because of its largely unaltered features. Local building historian Peter Welford soon convinced us that this had also once been a house of considerable status for the area, with its tall chimneys and well-dressed stone. This led to considerable soul searching about how we should restore it: its later fabric was if anything more dilapidated than earlier, hard wood remnants. In the end, we decided with our architect Andrew Thomas that as both Dolbelydr's architectural and historic significance stemmed from its late 16th-century form, we should present it as closely as possible to its primary appearance.

The house would once have stood in a cluster of walls and farm outbuildings. The forecourt walls have been reconstructed on the footings of the originals and are typical feature of buildings in Denbighshire at this time. As was customary in the 16th century, the walls have again been flush-pointed and then limewashed. Most of the wall at eaves height also had to be rebuilt. Much of the first floor framing remained on the site as well as some of that on the second floor so replacement of the floor joists was not too difficult. The collapsed roof structure was a bigger job, subcontracted to specialists Carpenter Oak and Woodland who took away the roof timbers to their framing yard in Perthshire. Here they painstakingly reassembled the roof frame.

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Late in the autumn of 2002, a forty foot crane arrived on site to lift the three massive roof trusses back into position. Stone tiles were used for the roof covering, as they would originally have been. There were vestiges of a rear dormer window, which we have recreated and the building now has a full set of correctly sized windows in their original positions, several having twelve or even fourteen mullioned lights, survivals of great rarity. These too are limewashed once more, in imitation of stone.

Inside, Dolbelydr is a fairly typical lateral entry house in plan, except for the large lobby area to the left of the front door which is unusual. A great deal of thought went into how to convert the inside of the building for use as a Landmark, while respecting as much of its primary floor plan and purpose as possible. We became confident that we could accurately reposition the screen to the hall with its Tudor-arched doors, which led us to seek permission to get rid of later partitions. The original newel post for the spiral staircase was returned by a public-spirited member of the public one open day. In truth, the tightness of these stairs makes them impractical for anything other than the time-traveller in us all and so we have also made a new oak staircase in the latest position for which there was evidence. Apart from this second staircase, the original ground floor plan is largely in its original form. The shower room stands in what was once the service bay and the ground floor bedroom would originally have been a parlour.

Although the hall would have become a less communal space by the late 16th century, it would still have been used for cooking and we therefore decided to create the freestanding 'island kitchen' in the body of the hall. The slate floor was largely original although many flags had to be replaced. Unobtrusive underfloor heating has been installed. We found the bressemer lying in the middle of the floor – presumably someone had tried to plunder it but then found it simply too heavy to remove. All the bressemer above the hearths would probably have been plastered over originally; to avoid losing the fine moulded stops, we decided instead to limewash them. The cupboard to the left of the hearth was re-made with a fretted ventilation panel, using a photo from the 1970s and fragments found in the room (these probably date from the nineteenth century). The shaft to the right of this hearth was formerly a garderobe, accessed from the solar. We found a single diamond-shaped quarry amid the debris of the house, which, like much early glass, was a surprisingly dark green. Today's glass retains a greenish tinge and was made in France. The slate floor on the ground floor may be primary, although many of its flags had to be replaced. On the hall-side face of the screen by the doorway two early nineteenth century characters have been roughly scratched – one a soldier with a cockade in his hat, the other perhaps his lady.

The internal partitions in the building were all found to be wattle and daub rather than the more usual lime plaster and this is what has been used for the partitions. Patches of the earliest lime plaster coat on the walls survive in various places through the building, which we have tried to replicate. The division of the first and second floors largely follows the line of original partitions, retraced from evidence in the framing, and new oak floors have been laid. The timbers have almost all been limewashed in. Originally, the solar and perhaps the main bedroom would have been brightly decorated with wall paintings in imitation of wall hangings. The timbers would have been crisp and new. By contrast, the surface of most of the fallen timbers we salvaged from the ground was rough and decayed and so it was decided to limewash them. The first floor solar (today the Landmark's sitting room), then and now, is by far the finest room in the house, given extra elegance by being open to the roof with its arch-braced truss. Today's visitors can emerge from the spiral stairs just as Henry Salesbury would have done and gaze like him through green tinged diamond quarry panes down this quiet valley from Dolbelydr, or Meadow of the Rays of the Sun. Just like the house, little has changed here in almost five hundred years.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Dolbelydr sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*