

LETTAFORD, NORTH BOVEY, DEVON

The ancient hamlet of Lettaford, meaning 'the clear ford', is sited in a sheltered hollow close, near a crossing stream and ancient trackways. It now consists of three farmhouses with their attendant buildings, and a converted chapel. At its centre is a green, once forming a common area between the three farms.

The houses themselves are all on the east-facing slope, away from the prevailing wind, and are sited lengthways across the contour, on platforms excavated into the hill at the upper end. All three are or were at one time long-houses, a type of building which falls within the group labelled by historians of vernacular architecture as the House-and-Byre Homestead, in which men and animals live under one roof, and in its model form share the same entrance. The term 'Dartmoor long-house' is also frequently used. In the majority of cases the shippon, as the byre is always called in Devon, has long been entirely rebuilt or simply incorporated into the house. Fortunately, some have survived unaltered such as the shippon at Sanders.

Lettaford is typical of the many isolated farm settlements that encircle the central mass, or Forest, of Dartmoor, sometimes as single farmsteads, very often in small groups of three or more together as here. Most of them have been in existence from the early Middle Ages or before: clearance of these borderlands was begun on a serious scale by the Saxons from the 7th century, and there is evidence that the farmers of that period were occupying land that had already long been colonised. Lettaford is first mentioned in an Assize record of 1248 but it is not known whether it began as a single farm or group.

The earlier Tudor period saw a renewal of building activity in several other Dartmoor settlements. After a period of decline in the 15th century following the disaster of the Black Death, population pressure elsewhere in Devon, and new sources of income from tin mining and cloth manufacture, brought about an influx of new settlers, and therefore new buildings, on the fringes of Dartmoor from about 1500. This process continued throughout the 16th century and into the 17th century, but by then had become part of the Great Rebuild that was going on in the country as a whole. The reflection of this in Lettaford can be seen in later 16th and 17th-century improvements to all three houses, with the insertion of chimneys and the flooring in open halls to create additional first floor rooms.

Sanders

When it was built in about 1500, Sanders contained, firstly, a hall open to the roof. The fire was lit on a central hearth, the smoke from which gathered among the rafters, and seeped out between the thatch of the roof. At the lower end of the hall, beyond a timber screen, was a cross-passage with a door at either end; and beyond that a shippon. The division between hall and shippon was very rudimentary, just a post- and-panel screen between the main area of the hall and the passage, of which one section

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

survives. The fine granite ashlar of the front and east gable demonstrates the relatively high social status of its builders.

Major improvements were made in the later 16th century including the insertion of two upper chambers, jettied out into the hall, to give more sleeping space. Access to the chambers would have been by a ladder from the hall.

In the 17th century, a new chimney was built across the end of the hall, backing onto the cross-passage. The existence of a chimney made the lofty roof-space unnecessary, and so the hall was now floored in, to create a third upper chamber. Assuming there to have been an earlier lateral fireplace (and it would be surprising for a house of this status to continue with only an open fire for so long), this was now adapted to provide a stair to the upper floor, with a bread oven beside it. At about the same period, a lean-to was added at the back of the hall. Inevitably a number of alterations were made later, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most noticeable has been the raising of the roofs of both shippon and dwelling, adapting them to a shallower pitch for slate. In its essentials Sanders remains the house it had become by 1700.

The farm-buildings that were an essential accompaniment to the house have been more extensively rebuilt and renewed. Only part of the small barn behind the house dates from the 16th century; mostly it is 18th-century. The linhey, stable and pig-houses are later still, probably all dating from the 19th century.

Restoration - Sanders

Work began in 1977 to improve drainage on the site. Later, the electricity supply for the hamlet brought in by underground cables. The asbestos slate covering of the house was stripped off completely, porch and lean-to included. Battens and rafters were repaired or replaced as necessary, and then random Delabole slates were laid, in diminishing courses. Only minor repairs to the walls were required including raking out defective pointing, and repointing with lime mortar. The chimneys were also repointed, and the granite cap of the hall chimney repaired; brick tops were replaced with slate cappings. The cement repair of the main door surround was hacked off, and the jambs and head rebuilt or made good as necessary. The frames of all the outside doors were repaired. Window frames were repaired and a new oak lintol was inserted over the window in the shippon. Drip moulds were provided over those on the front most exposed the to Dartmoor elements.

Inside the cross-passage, the masonry of the chimney stack was cleaned and repointed. The plank partition on its lower side was repaired. In the shippon, apart from the clearance of accumulated rubbish, nothing was done at all.

In the dwelling, the stair that had been inserted against the north wall was removed to allow repair of the oak post and panel screen and the jetty beam was repaired. A new door jamb was made copying the existing original and a new timber stair was then built in the 17th-century position. A new slate-paved floor was laid at the same level as the hall, which meant lowering it a few inches, and underpinning the walls at this end, since they rested on the ground where the original builders followed the slope of the hill. The Bungalow Belle stove was dismantled and reassembled in the same position, but at the new level.

Downstairs, plaster was removed to reveal the fine masonry of the walls, which were repointed and then limewashed. The back wall of the fireplace was exposed, where it had been plastered over, and the bread oven repaired. Upstairs, all the ceilings were removed, and reformed to follow the line of the roof, with insulation above. The walls were limewashed, as they had always been, the colour matching as closely as possible the former rich golden shade.

In the yard behind the house, the outbuildings were also in need of repair. The walls of the linhay, stable and pigsty were all rebuilt and repointed, and the roof of the linhay made good. The barn was in the worst condition, and had been given a corrugated iron roof. When the collapsing walls had been rebuilt, it was given a new roof of Devon wheat reed thatch.

Lettaford Chapel

Bible Christian services were first held in the day school in Lettaford in 1860. The move must partly have been due to the influence of the schoolmistress, Mrs Susan Walling, and it may also have been due to her that a new building was erected to serve as both schoolroom and chapel. For about two years before this a small number of people had been meeting in cottages in hamlets nearby. It was not a wealthy community, consisting almost entirely of small farmers and farm labourers. Out of these the group of preachers would have been selected, who took it in turns to lead services in all the twelve chapels making up the Chagford Circuit. Records of building work suggest the existing chapel building opened in 1867 or 1868.

In the 1870s, the ownership of the Schoolroom passed to the Bible Christian Church, so that it became a fully fledged chapel, vested in trustees drawn from the congregation. The congregation declined with the gradual depopulation of the area during agricultural depression of the late 19th century.

The Bible Christians joined with the Free Methodists and the New Connexion to form the United Methodist Church in 1907. This foreshadowed their final unification in 1932 with the Wesleyans and the Primitive Methodists, to become the Methodist Church of Great Britain.

In the 1920s there must have been a rise in the congregation, and in the number of children locally, for in 1922 a schoolroom was added 'at the rear of the chapel', with a doorway leading through in the corner of the south wall. It was made of galvanised iron lined with wood, and was lit by oil lamps like the chapel. On the other end, or 'front' of the chapel a garage was added, also made out of galvanised iron.

By 1943, gas-lighting had been installed followed by electricity in 1962, when the congregation numbered only 4. The number of active members in the whole of the Chagford Circuit had dwindled so much that it was decided to amalgamate it with its neighbours by 1977. Lettaford was incorporated into the Exeter Circuit, and soon afterwards the decision was made to close the chapel altogether. Landmark, having already restored the long house, Sanders, was keen to preserve the chapel, feeling that it was an integral part of the character of the place, and so it was conveyed to us in 1981.

The Conversion of the Old Chapel

The Old Chapel was converted to retain its large open interior space. The two galvanised iron additions were removed and in place of the schoolroom on the south end, an extension built to provide a bathroom. The doorway leading into the garage was blocked, reinstating the chimney. A new fireplace was then inserted. The floor level of the chapel has been raised to enable those inside to see out, and to help air to circulate underneath, to prevent damp. This meant raising the entrance doorway as well, and building the steps up to it. The original door itself has been retained. The roof was overhauled, retaining existing slates where possible. New plumbing and electrics were installed. The walls were patched where the existing plaster was decayed, and then limewashed. All the new woodwork is softwood. Care has been taken in the furnishing to keep the interior as uncluttered as possible, in order to preserve the plain and simple feel of the building.

Higher Lettaford

In 2012-13, Landmark's Trustees undertook a careful review of all our buildings and decided that Higher Lettaford should be sold, a very rare occurrence in our portfolio. This was because it had been acquired pre-emptively by our founder John Smith, to protect the important setting of Lettaford, and not because it was itself of outstanding importance or in jeopardy. Higher Lettaford's release also put a potential family home back into the general housing stock, and all the income from its sale was used by Landmark directly for other building rescue projects.

We are sad to see any Landmark disappear from our portfolio, but we can be content in the knowledge that it all contributes to our overall charitable purpose, of saving buildings for future generations to enjoy.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Sanders sleeps up to 5 people and the Chapel up to 2. To book a Lettaford building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.