

The Landmark Trust

MAESYRONNEN CHAPEL, NR. HAY-ON-WYE, POWYS

This chapel was registered at the Easter Quarter Session of the Assizes at Presteigne in 1697, thus making it the earliest purpose-built Nonconformist chapel surviving unaltered in Wales, and predating other buildings by nearly 80 years. Minor alterations have in fact been carried out, but none have altered the basic rural character of the building. The roof was renewed in the 18th century when the walls were found to be spreading, and the present system of posts and tie-beams was inserted to prevent this. The original earth floor was covered in flagstones in the early 19th century. The simple solid furniture, some dating back to the late 17th century, would have been added bit by bit as the congregation could afford it.

The little house adjoining the chapel, was probably built in its present form in the first quarter of the 18th century and was to house a caretaker. But neither chapel nor cottage were built from scratch - both were adapted from a building that had already existed and which had probably been used for clandestine meetings of Dissenters following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and his subsequent intolerance of anything outside the Established Church. Tradition has it a 'Beudy' or byre/cow house was used for worship in this area even during the Commonwealth.

Evidence for this earlier building stands in the wall between chapel and cottage, where there is a timber 'cruck' truss formed by splitting a curved oak trunk into two to form a pair. This timber-framed building, may have been a 'long house', with a dwelling house and a byre built in a single continuous range, with a door leading through from one to the other. This house would have had no chimney, only a central fireplace. Around 1600 a chimney was added and the walls built up in stone. The 'post and panel' partition that can be seen between the kitchen and the store room may also date from this period but it is not in its original position and its finer side faces the store room. This Jacobean house may also have continued slightly further to the west than the present wall, which is of later masonry.

When the byre was rebuilt as the chapel, the doorway (now under the stairs) between it and the house was blocked up. It is possible that a caretaker was already living there, looking after the secret meeting place and making sure that evidence of it was hidden from the authorities. One would certainly have been installed in 1697, and in a deed of 1720, a "little house" is mentioned which implies that the existing cottage was already in existence rather than the quite substantial house which preceded it.

The last caretaker to live in the cottage was Mrs Annie Lewis who looked after the chapel for 52 years. She and her husband George, moved in a few years after their marriage, and she gave birth to 15 children here. The house was obviously too small for all of them, and so when a new baby arrived, one of the older children would be sent away to live with relatives, a practice that was quite common in large families then. She had to carry water from a well in the wood until the arrival of a stand pipe at the bottom of the lane. As caretaker she kept the chapel clean, lit the black stove, and opened the door for members of the congregation and visitors.

Mr Lewis died in 1974 and in 1979 Mrs Lewis moved out to go and live with her sons, until her death in 1985 at the age of 88.

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RESTORATION AND REPAIR

Repairs were carried out on the chapel in the 1960s but by 1980 further work was needed to it and the cottage, and this was beyond the means of the chapel Trustees and congregation. The Landmark Trust offered to help by taking on and repairing the cottage so that the future of both buildings would be ensured.

Work began in 1985. The first job was to clear away derelict corrugated iron sheds and lean-tos that had been built against the outer walls. One of these at the back was to be replaced with a new lean-to containing the bathroom. It is constructed of elm weather-boards. Some major structural repairs were also needed. The walls of the stable (now store room) were in danger of collapse and had to be completely rebuilt, with underpinning at the corners. The straight joint in the front wall between the stable and cottage was opening up and steel ties were inserted to hold the two together. All walls were then repointed with traditional lime mortar.

The roof was stripped of its stone slates and the underlying rafters strengthened were required. Steel brackets and ends were used to give necessary support to the purlins and the main tie beam. A dormer on the front of the cottage was taken down, and two new ones added at the back to light the bedrooms. The slope was slightly altered to take in the new bathroom. Finally the slates were put back with second-hand ones to match, and the ridge tile reused. Several of the doors and windows needed new lintels, and the frames, windows and ironmongery were all repaired or remade in green oak as necessary.

Inside the cottage a partition was removed to make the kitchen/dining room and a new door opening was made between this and the sitting room. The post and panel partition, which had rotted badly at its base was repaired. The flagstones in both downstairs rooms were lifted and relaid on a damp proof membrane. Upstairs a new partition was put in to divide the landing from the small bedroom and the doorway into the larger bedroom was moved. The roof repairs had all been carefully done so as not to damage the ceilings, which, with their laths and lime plaster, were left intact. The walls have also been lime plastered as this allows any moisture to evaporate gradually - it is not practical or desirable to insert damp proof courses into such thick stone walls. Similarly both the limewash on the walls and the special porous paint on the woodwork, allow the materials to 'breath ' naturally.

In both bedrooms the floors were taken up and a new 'sandwich' floor laid: new boards were laid first on top of the joists; then a sheet of thin lead to prevent drafts and to provide sound insulation; and lastly the old boards were relaid crossways, with a few second-hand ones to make up any gaps.

When the Landmark Trust took on the cottage it still had no running water and only very elementary electrical wiring, and so all pipes and wires are new, together with the bathroom, kitchen and heating system. New paving stones were laid and a new boundary wall built. The cottage is available to rent for holidays for up to four people all year round.

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