

# The Landmark Trust

**SANDERS, LETTAFORD, DEVON**

The ancient hamlet of Lettaford, meaning 'the clear ford', lies in a sheltered hollow close to Dartmoor, near a stream crossing and the intersection of ancient trackways. Today, it consists of just three farmhouses with attendant buildings, and a converted chapel. At its centre is a green, once forming a common area between the three farms. Until 2013, Landmark owned, and had restored, two of the farmhouses and the chapel. 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 has been used by Landmark directly for other building rescue projects.

All the houses are on the east-facing slope, away from the prevailing wind, sited lengthways across the contour on platforms excavated into the hill at the upper end. They are, or were, long-houses, homesteads in which men and animals live under one roof and, in its purest form, share the same entrance. In most cases the shippon, as the byre or beast house is always called in Devon, has long been rebuilt or incorporated into the house. The unaltered shippon at Sanders is a very rare survival.

Lettaford was first mentioned in an Assize record of 1248, and 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 date back to the early Middle Ages or before: serious clearance of these borderlands was begun by the Saxons from the 7th century, but even they were occupying land that had already long been colonised.

The 15th century brought a period of decline after the Black Death, but then population pressure elsewhere in Devon, and new sources of income from tin mining and cloth manufacture, brought an influx of new settlers to these fringes of Dartmoor from about 1500. This continued through the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and they built and adapted houses, all part of the wider boom known as the Great Rebuilding. At Lettaford, this is seen in later 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century improvements to all three houses, as chimneys were inserted and flooring introduced to open halls to create additional first floor rooms.

As built in about 1500, Sanders contained, firstly, a hall open to the roof. The fire was lit on a central hearth, the smoke rising to the rafters, and seeping 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 just a post- and-panel screen between the main area of the hall and the passage, of which one section survives. The fine granite ashlar of the front and east gable demonstrates the relatively high social status of its builders.

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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 at this stage would have been by a ladder from the hall. In the 17th century, a new chimney stack 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. It is thought an earlier lateral fireplace was now adapted to provide a staircase to the upper floor, with a bread oven beside it. At about the same time, a lean-to was added at the back of the hall. Later alterations in the 18th and 19th centuries raised the roofs of both shippon and dwelling, adapting them to a shallower pitch for slate, instead of their original thatch. In essence, however, 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 lincay (or lean-to), stable and pig-houses are later still, probably all dating from the 19th century.

Sanders was restored in 1977. Site drainage was improved and the electricity supply for the hamlet brought in by underground cables. The asbestos slate covering was stripped from house, porch and lean-to; 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 needed, 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. Door and window frames were rebuilt or made good as necessary. Drip moulds were provided over those on the front most exposed the to Dartmoor elements.

Inside the cross-passage, the chimney stack masonry was cleaned and repointed. In the shippon, apart from the clearance of accumulated rubbish, nothing was done at all. In the dwelling, a stair that had been inserted against the north wall was removed to allow repair of the oak post and panel screen. A new door jamb was made copying the existing original and a new timber stair 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.

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 lincay, stable and pigsty were all rebuilt and repointed, and the roof of the lincay 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, as it originally had.

*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. To book this or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*