

Themes and Variations in Merioneth: an Essay on Vernacular Houses for Ron Brunskill

by

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INTRODUCTION

This essay explores in a regional context some of the themes that Ron Brunskill has developed in his publications which have done so much to establish vernacular architecture as a field of study. Brunskill's combination of detailed recording with broad generalisation has established his *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* (1971), now in its fourth edition (2000), as a classic. Brunskill's idea of the 'vernacular threshold' has proved especially influential. As he explains the idea, when recording examples of domestic buildings 'one finds that many surviving buildings provide a continuous thread until a point in time when suddenly all evidence in the form of surviving buildings comes to a stop'. Brunskill goes on to suggest that 'this point varies with size-type, but it is so sudden that clearly the emergence, or complete reconstruction of houses in material permanent enough to survive, is something of great significance'.¹ In Merioneth, diligent searching has brought to light a number of late-medieval houses – more than might perhaps be expected in such an apparently inhospitable terrain. The range of surviving medieval houses is interesting, but the replacement of medieval houses is also fascinating. In a relatively short space of time, between c.1540–c.1640, storeyed houses of a distinctive type came to dominate Snowdonia and their construction must have erased substantial numbers of durable hall-houses.

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For the authors the contrast between the neighbouring western counties of Ceredigion (where they live) and Merioneth (where they like to work) provokes frequent reflection on the 'vernacular threshold'. Ceredigion (Cardiganshire) has an essentially nineteenth-century built landscape but Merioneth preserves a relatively large number of sub-medieval storeyed houses and their late-medieval predecessors. This contrast is difficult to explain.² Was it due simply to different traditions of mass walling, with the low, clay-walled buildings of Cardiganshire proving less durable and more difficult to adapt than the substantial stone-walled houses of Merioneth? Are there social factors at work which are not immediately obvious? In this respect, the Snowdonian house prompts reflection on Ron's related but less well-known idea of the 'polite threshold'.³ The Merioneth house, originally set apart from its scatter of farm-buildings, exemplifies the 'polite threshold'. These were houses built by an unusually numerous and interrelated gentry class who prided themselves on their pedigrees and continued to be patrons of the bards into the seventeenth century.

In Merioneth, as in much of Wales but in marked contrast with Ireland and Scotland, it is the emergence of the hall-house in the fifteenth century which is our vernacular threshold. Tree-ring dates suggest that the substantial hall-house appeared as the county was recovering from the effects of Glyndŵr's rebellion. They help to confirm Fox and Raglan's conjecture (made without the help of scientific dating) that the earliest houses surviving in Monmouthshire were pre-Elizabethan but post-Glyndŵr.⁴ This is later, but not much later, than the emergence of hall-houses in quantity in the richer parts of England, notably the south-east and the west Midlands, as evidence for the reconstruction of rural society in the wake of the Black Death. Merioneth has a fair number of late-medieval hall-houses, several cruck framed, and several 'modernised' by the insertion of a fireplace backing on the entry, and most (but not all) *tripartite* in their plan, that is with the hall sited between inner and outer rooms. What is striking about Snowdonia (and Anglesey) is that this tripartite plan is not often reproduced amongst the later sub-medieval storeyed houses, as it is in other Welsh regions.

The Snowdonian house essentially has a bipartite plan. Instead of the many tripartite plans of hall between inner and outer rooms, typical of the later Middle Ages, and its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century storeyed successors, it consists of hall and outer rooms only. There is no inner room, no dais partition, and no 'high table'. The focal point is a large gable-end fireplace alongside which is frequently placed a winding stone stairway leading to the first floor. The cross-passage entered by opposed doorways is a standard feature, and beyond the passage are two small unheated rooms side by side entered from the passage by twin doorways, one doorway often larger and more ornate than the other, indicating perhaps that one was a parlour and the other a store. On the first floor are usually two chambers, that furthest from the stair with its own fireplace, that nearest, the 'through bedroom', unheated. These rooms were usually open to the roof which was sometimes ornately finished with cusped windbraces.

Over most of Merioneth, as in the rest of Gwynedd, the late-medieval tripartite

plan of open hall between inner and outer room yielded to a bipartite storeyed house of hall and outer rooms only, heated by fireplaces on the outside walls, a few lateral, but mostly sited at the gable-ends. These houses appear to have been intended to be free-standing and to have been entirely domestic in their room use. The relationship between the three-unit open-hall houses and its two-unit storeyed successor is an interesting and difficult problem. On the eastern side of Wales one often finds structural evidence for a medieval predecessor in an early house of lobby-entry or hearth-passage plan. In the Snowdonian house there is generally no such evidence, although the downhill siting at Carrog-uchaf and Crafnant (below), and at other sites, and the differences between upper and lower courses of masonry, sometimes hint strongly at a reconstructed hall-house. Only very occasionally, as at Tŷ-mawr (Gwybrnant, Caernarfonshire), the removal of plaster can reveal the stubs of cruck-blades cut off flush with the walls when a ceiling was inserted and the eaves raised. However, even if medieval fabric is often difficult to identify with certainty in the Snowdonian house, it is our contention that the ground-floor layout of the Snowdonian house may reproduce the hall and outer-room part of the hall-house plan. The third unit of the medieval tripartite plan – the inner-room – has been transferred to the first floor of the Snowdonian house where it was given the luxury of a fireplace and often dignified with a good roof.

It is revealing that the tripartite plan tended to appear as a storeyed house type in Merioneth in the eastern margin of the county, where the lobby-entry might replace the cross-passage (as in neighbouring Montgomeryshire), and where new-built houses of hearth-passage type are occasionally encountered (*cf.* Tŷ-mawr, below). It is also found in a few houses of 'Renaissance' inspiration where a central entry to the hall replaces the cross-passage, and where the hall is changing from principal living-room into an entrance-vestibule, as instanced at Dolau-gwyn and, more problematically, at Dôl-y-moch, two large houses described below. However, the overwhelming regional adherence to the two-unit 'Snowdonian' house is remarkable, even in houses of undoubtedly high status. Several examples are illustrated in this essay: Maesygarneidd, Crafnant, Llwyn-du, and Bron-y-foel-isaf, but the selection could have been greatly extended.

Building history in Snowdonia may have been influenced by changes in patterns of inheritance. The Merioneth gentry abandoned partible inheritance – associated with the old hall-house – and adopted primogeniture as they built their new storeyed houses. They made provision for their widows in diminutive dower-houses which were scaled-down versions of their own 'Snowdonian' houses. This seems to be the explanation of the phenomenon of the 'unit system', which was first identified in Merioneth and is noted below at Y Faner, Crafnant, and Llwyn-du. The survival of so many early Snowdonian houses is partly explained by their robust construction, convenient plan, but also by their decline in status to tenanted farmhouses as many of the smaller estates were absorbed by the leviathan estates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These Snowdonian houses, originally the homes of squireens, are often now farmhouses embedded in outbuildings, as at Maesygarneidd. These outbuildings are usually later additions, made perhaps when a landowner's

house had become a tenanted farm. The house intended to stand by itself amidst a scatter of detached buildings, we must regard as the sixteenth-century Snowdonian aristocratic norm.

The houses we have selected for description were all built for a land-owning upper class, 'the poor gentlemen of Wales', but not so poor that they could not support a large class of poets and minstrels, cultivated men who often pursued literature on their own account. In Merioneth these houses and their hall-house predecessors were the homes of a class of closely-related gentry whose praises the Welsh poets were to sing, whose generosity they were to invoke, and whose deaths they were to lament in strict metrical verse (*cywydd moliant*, *cywydd gofyn* and *cywydd marwnad*), in return for board and lodging. Indeed the newly-raised halls must have provided an ideal setting for the harp-accompanied declamations of the *beirdd yr uchelwyr* (poets of the upper class) who constituted an itinerant entertainment industry. For such musical occasions the characteristic post-and-panel partitions flanking the high table and the passage, and the lofty open wooden roof of the halls must have provided the ideal acoustic conditions. Of the ancient houses discovered purely by architectural investigation, probably more than half have also been identified by independent literary research as the centres of bardic patronage, many of them quite small farmsteads, that one would have tended to think of as the homes of yeoman tenants, but which we must now regard as the homes of gentlemen, the residences of patrons of literature. The following pages try to bring out some of the significant themes and variations in a small selection of case studies which we hope will divert Ron during his halcyon leisure, part of which will be spent in Merioneth.⁶

1. Y FANER, CYMER ABBEY (LLANELLTUD) (Figs. 1-3)

Y Faner, standing close to the Cistercian Abbey of Cymer, is amongst the first and most enigmatic of the late-medieval houses in Merioneth. Today it takes the form of an end-passage house with a rear projecting kitchen. The tall mullion and high transom wooden windows must date from *c.*1700. However, the ornately cusped and arch braced collar-beam, tenon-purlin roof gives a dendro-date of 1441, coinciding with the brief reign of an ambitious if not rapacious abbot who was later imprisoned for his misdeeds.⁷ We think he must have built Y Faner for his own occupation rather than as the monastic guest house, which is the alternative explanation of the building which stands a short distance to the west of the ruins of the ancient abbey and is the only medieval structure on the site to retain its roof, one of the most splendid in Merioneth.

The form of plan, as it survives, is highly unusual – a grand hall, now without inner or outer rooms, which remained open from ground to ridge until the early twentieth century. Alongside is a rear wing entered from the 'high' end of the hall by a rebated pointed doorway suggesting that the 'cross' (the hall) and the 'stem' (now a kitchen) must be contemporary units of this T-shaped building.

We toyed with the idea that 'stem' might have been the hall and the 'cross' the parlour which would have been the more usual medieval arrangement as the plan

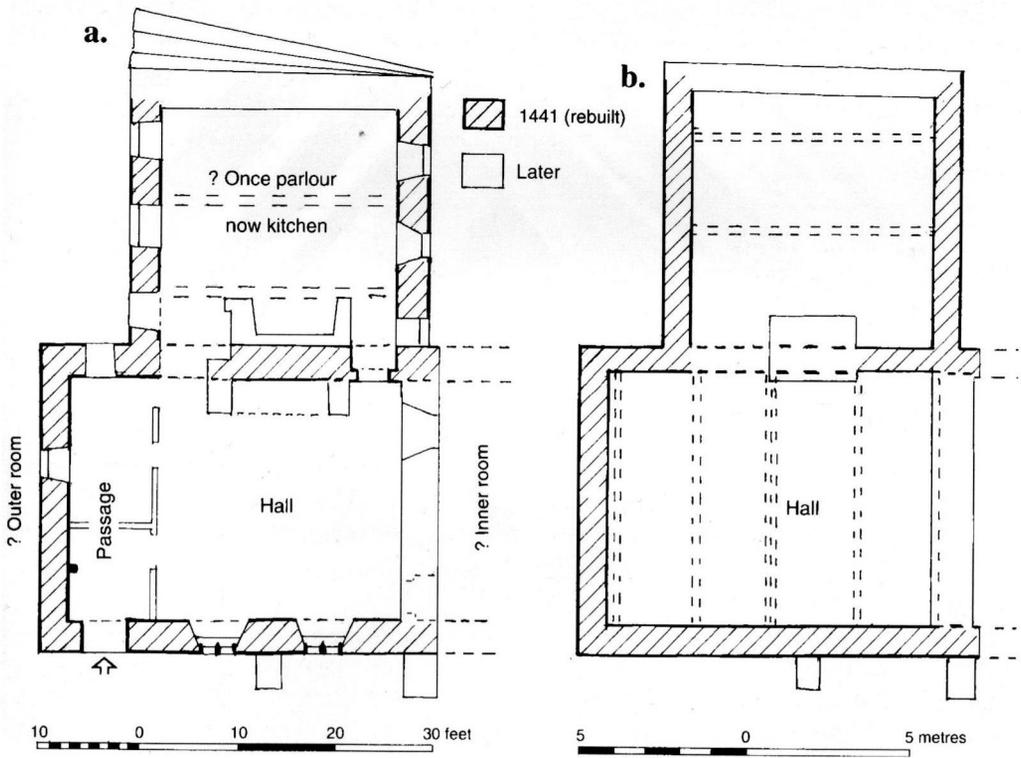


Fig. 1
Y Faner (Llanelltud): general view and plans – (a) ground floor; (b) roof



Fig. 2

Y Faner: (*top left*) post and arched head by entry; (*top right*) pointed doorway alongside dais end from hall; (*bottom*) cusped and archbraced truss over present kitchen

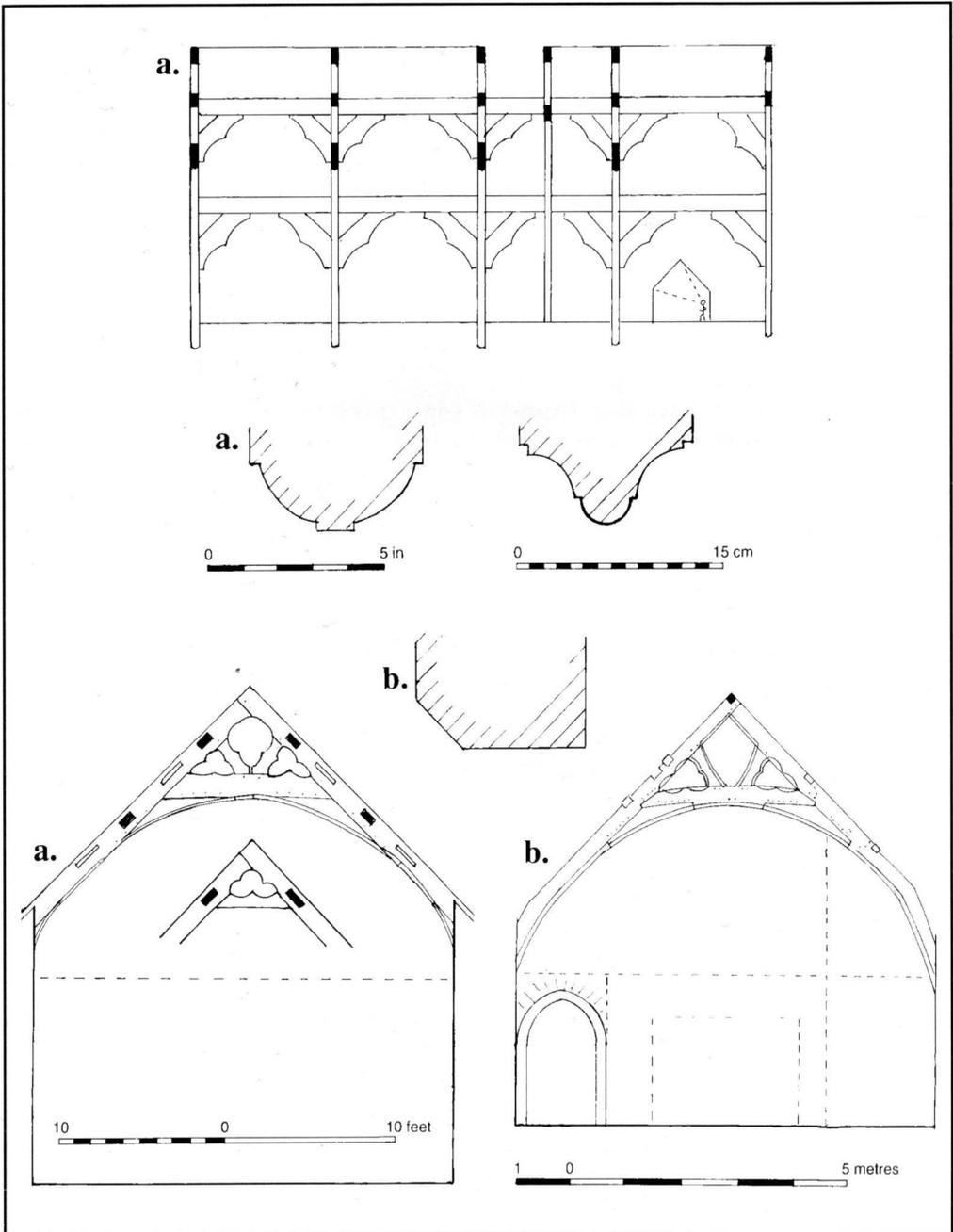


Fig. 3

Y Faner: (a) roof truss over hall showing louver opening and soffit mouldings;
(b) roof truss over present kitchen showing moulding

incorporating a rear projecting kitchen is hardly known before the seventeenth century. An alternative idea was that the stem, which also had one cusped collar-beam truss, unlikely in the case of a kitchen or service-room, might have served as the abbots' parlour. In the end, after the discovery of a louver-truss in the roof framework over the 'cross', we felt that the 'cross' must be the hall and that originally it may once have stood between now lost inner and outer rooms. There is some evidence for a lost outer room in the form of a fragmentary wooden framework now standing against the stone end wall which could be all that survives of a two- or three-door passage partition. There are also some indications that the hall once also extended beyond the dais end to enclose an inner bay. If so, then Y Faner would have conformed to the usual medieval tripartite plan of hall between outer and inner rooms, but we can think of no medieval parallels for the apparently contemporary rear projection.

We would like to have Ron Brunskill's interpretation of this most enigmatic structure which is the setting of one of the best known *cywyddau* (poems in strict metres) in the Welsh language, *Caraf y morfa ym Meirionnydd* – 'I love the fen in Merioneth.' Fen it certainly was when the whole site was recently flooded, in spite of a dyke raised to prevent such calamities. We conjecture that previous floods might account for the loss of inner and outer rooms whose former existence we have hypothesised and also perhaps for the rebuilding of much of the lateral projection.

However, that is not the end of the mystery of Y Faner. Alongside the medieval house, not a stone's throw away, is a second house, storeyed and sub-medieval in character. We ask ourselves if this is another example of the 'unit-system', first identified as characteristic of Merioneth, where a second house is built close to, or sometimes even abutting the first. The subject is discussed further in relation to Crafnant, where it is clear that the subsidiary house was a type of dower-house.

2. CEFN-CAER (PENNAL) (Figs. 4-5)

This is a substantial three-unit, late-medieval hall-house with an exceptionally fine open roof which has survived the modernisation of the house, first in the seventeenth century and again in the nineteenth. The situation of the house calls for special notice: it stands within the Roman fort of Pennal, close to the western gateway, and its deliberate siting must represent an attempt by a locally dominant family to appropriate the powerful symbolism of the fort as a *locus* of power. Indeed, Cefn-caer may have been the successor of a hall which belonged to the lost generation of substantial thirteenth- and fourteenth-century hall-houses for which there are documentary references but which have not survived as standing structures. The siting of a house within the enclosure of a Roman fort would have been a very potent statement of 'lordship'.

The house seems always to have been stone walled. It consisted originally of a three-bayed open hall, heated by an open hearth, standing between a narrow inner bay at the north-east and a wider outer bay at the south-west standing over a cellar. It is likely that both the outer and the inner bays were storeyed in the hall-house

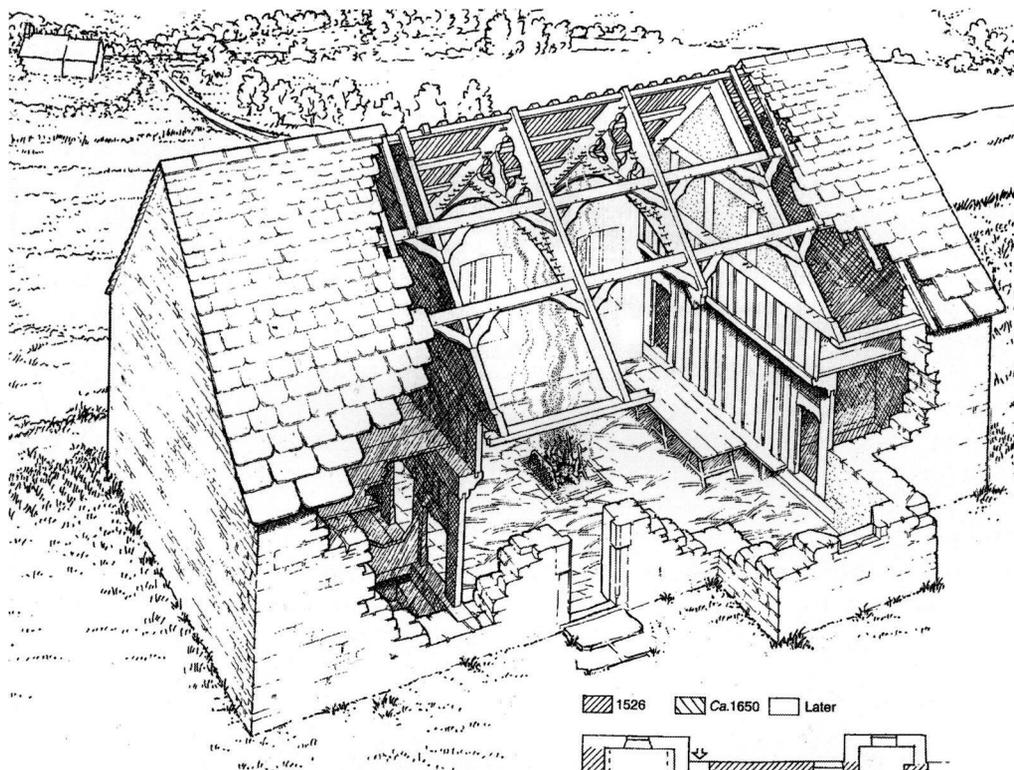


Fig. 4
 Cefn-caer (Pennal): (above) as built in 1526 showing open hall between inner and outer rooms; (right) plan showing inserted chimney backing on passage and ceiling over hall

phase. The undulations of the dais partition, until recently totally concealed under plaster, have now been revealed as the posts and panels of a fine two-door partition under a moulded, projecting head-beam which supports the upper part of the partition. The partition is in effect an internal jetty and clearly forms a dais canopy marking the place of honour in the hall. The passage partition, only partially visible, is also of post-and-panel construction, and preserves an ornate (double ellipse profile) door-head over the cellar stair. The moulded head-beam is similar to that over the dais partition. Surviving from the medieval period are two arch braced collar-beam trusses over the hall, complete with struts, the whole apex being cusped. The purlins are threaded through the blades, as is the ridge-beam, and stiffened by cusped wind-braces. All the roof timbers are heavily smoke-blackened. It is likely



Fig. 5
Cefn-caer: (*above*) exterior;
(*below*) detail showing ceiling over oriel and shaped door-head over cellar stair

that much of the masonry, though probably none of the dressed stonework, dates from the late medieval period. The window lighting the dais partition on the north wall is likely to be on the site of a medieval window opening. It is possible that the projection extending the inner room to the north is also an original feature. The stone projection to the south alongside the dais partition may have been an oriel, and therefore possibly medieval, but it has a seventeenth-century specially decorated ceiling of chipped-carved joists. The oriel is said to have been the accustomed place for a favoured poet. The neighbouring *plas* of Nannau, as rebuilt in 1581 as a storeyed house, incorporated a special recessed window in the hall for the bards. The Cefn-caer family were bardic patrons and the poetic references have been collected by Glenys Davies.⁸

When was Cefn-caer built? The close dating of late-medieval houses is fraught with difficulty. Local tradition associates Cefn-caer with Owain Glyndŵr, the leader of a revolt against the Crown *c.*1400-15. He sealed and dated his famous letter to the French king from Pennal. However, the recent dendro-dating of a selection of domestic buildings by RCAHMW has shown that cusping in medieval Welsh hall-houses has a date range broadly 1430-1530.⁹ Within this date range, one of us favoured an early date and the other a late date. Dendrochronology conclusively showed that the later dating was correct. Several samples were taken from the principal structural timbers which gave closely related felling dates between spring 1525 and spring 1526.¹⁰

The felling date of 1526 allows the house to be put within its historical context. The house was built only ten years before the first Act of Union (1536) between England and Wales which altered permanently legal custom and practice, especially by the abolition of partible inheritance (gavelkind) in favour of primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest son). Under English law in the absence of a son the estate was divided equally between daughters. Under Welsh law it went to nephews. It is easy to see how this changed the whole process of estate building! Heiresses were eagerly pursued, and small estates expanded into leviathans as a result of judicious marriages.

Cefn-caer unexpectedly illustrates the tension between the old and new systems of inheritance. The genealogy of the family settled at Cefn-caer *c.*1600 (and probably before) is given in Robert Vaughan's pedigree book. They were an illegitimate branch of the influential Ynysmaengwyn family. Hugh ap Howell, the first of the family specifically said to be of Cefn-caer, and the probable builder of the house, was the illegitimate son of Howell ap Jenkyn of Ynysmaengwyn. According to a tradition (preserved by Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt) Howell ap Jenkin 'seeing that his father's estate was to be divided between his sons' plotted to secure his father's estate undivided. Howell imprisoned his father in Harlech castle (where his father-in-law was constable) and he was not released until he had disinherited his other sons. The quarrel between Howell and his brothers was continued into the next generation with some notable incidents between 'lust' combatants. No doubt the ramparts of the old Roman fort surrounding Cefn-caer would have offered a measure of defence in these skirmishes.¹¹

3. TY-MAWR (THE ROSE AND CROWN), GWYDDELWERN (FORMERLY MERIONETH, NOW DENBIGHSHIRE) (Fig. 6)

Tŷ-mawr is the most important early storeyed house to have come to light in the last few years.¹² Its unusual mixed stone and timber construction, complete plan form, and retention of early detail make it a house of exceptional interest. It is a 'marginal' house in the sense that it lies on the edge of the distribution maps of timber framing and the hearth-passage plan form. Beyond it to the west are numerous stone-built storeyed houses of Snowdonian type. It prompts reflections on the relationship between stone walling and timber framing, as well as the transition from open hall to storeyed, heated house, and the distribution of regional house types. It is a tripartite house and an example of the hearth-passage plan in an originally storeyed building, not the result of a hall-house conversion as at Cefn-caer.

The Rose and Crown occupies a prime position on the roadside adjacent to the parish church. Originally it seems to have been known, significantly, as Tŷ-mawr or 'Great House' – a reference both to its length and height, as well as its high status. Ty-mawr is stone walled at ground-floor level but elaborately timber-framed on the first floor. The posts supporting the trusses descend to the ground, several resting on pad stones. However, it is quite clear from an examination of the posts that the ground-floor containing walls were never timber framed. The gable ends were also partly timber framed. The upper gable end has been preserved by the addition of a later unit and was of quite exceptional quality, visible to those proceeding to the parish church. Above the mid-rail, five panels of ornate framing survive divided by heavy studs with pilasters finishing with heavy jowled heads which supported a jettied gable. In the first-floor lateral walls there are large panels of lozenge framing separated by close studding and window openings. The half-timbered work is ambitious.

The ground-floor openings in the stone wall are much altered but the original entry was of hearth-passage type, as is revealed by the surviving partition. The sequence of rooms was: unheated outer bay with evidence for a stair, cross-passage, hall (kitchen), and twin inner rooms. The cross-passage was divided from the outer bay by a (lost) post-and-panel partition. The large hall was heated by the fireplace at the lower end of the room; at the upper end a post-and-panel partition incorporating twin doorways led to the inner rooms.

Evidence for opposed, shuttered timber windows survives at the upper end of the hall. On the west side half the framing of a long mullioned window with a projecting groove for a shutter survives. The shutters may have been lifted into place when required and secured with an upper peg. On the east side the shutter groove of the window only survives. The windows are evidently contemporary with the stone wall which steps out to support the projecting shutter groove. This is a remarkable survival.

The trusses on the upper floor define three chambers lit from the lateral walls which echo the baying of the ground floor. The heated chamber above the hall was the principal (great) chamber. It has an ornate secondary truss sitting on the wall-

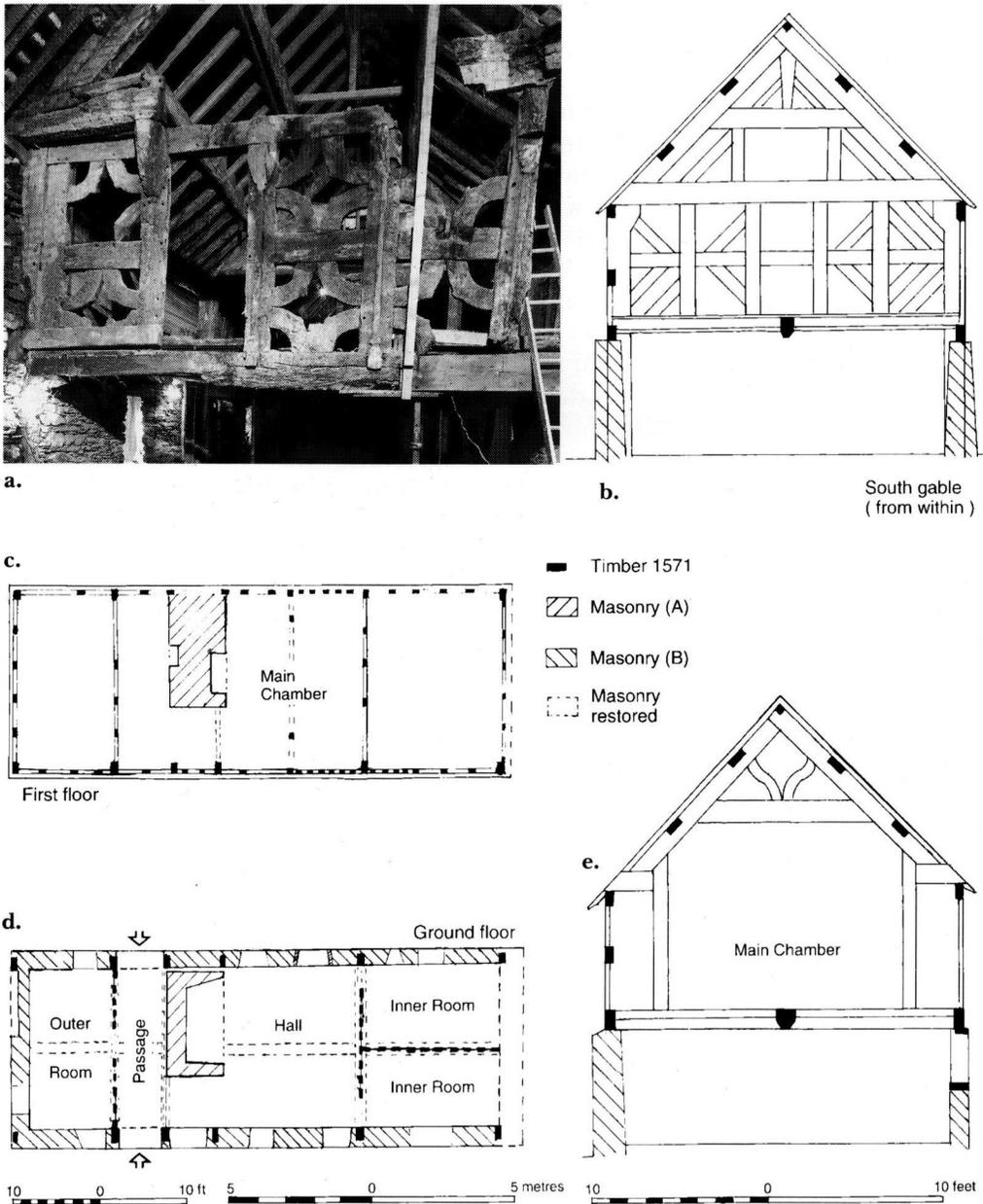


Fig. 6

Tŷ-mawr (Gwyddelwern): (a) detail of north end wall showing ornate timber framing; (b) south end wall; (c) first-floor plan; (d) ground-floor plan showing chimney backing on passage; (e) section through main chamber

plate with curved (reverse S) braces above the collar. The ornate apex was hidden at an early date by a now vanished ceiling supported by a framework morticed into the tie-beam.

The distribution of the three-unit hearth-passage house is well established.¹³ The house type is widely distributed in southern Wales but Tŷ-mawr belongs to a small scatter of hearth-passage houses in north Wales. Houses of this plan-type are sometimes medieval in origin with an inserted chimney, as at Cefn-caer. There are some puzzling details at the Rose and Crown which might suggest a hall-house origin. The fireplace may have been remodelled. It seems to have been built within the lateral walls and is not bonded to them. Stop-chamfers on the beam at the back of the fireplace do not relate to the present chimney. An earlier (framed?) chimney may therefore have been remodelled. There are slight traces of sooting on some roof timbers. Was this due to smoke seepage from the chimney rather than from an open hearth? It occurred to one of us that the present much patched stone walls may be a replacement of clay walling. This would account for the unusual post-and-truss framing, with full-height posts encased in the masonry below the first floor, and the absence of evidence for timber framing at ground level. A similar sequence has been proposed for Hafoty (Llansadwrn, Anglesey). However dendro-dating was to disprove our hypothesis of several building periods completely.

Tŷ-mawr is best understood as an early storeyed house of regional hearth-passage type. The elaborate first-floor framing announced that the house was a new *storeyed* house. The decorative timberwork internal in a hall-house like Cefn-caer was external at Tŷ-mawr. The architectural detail pointed to a likely building date in the second half of the sixteenth century. The pilasters supporting the gable-end jetty have mid-sixteenth-century parallels (*cf.* Old Impton, Radnorshire, 1542); however the decorative 'nibbed' framing is generally later (*cf.* The Old Vicarage, Berriew, Montgomeryshire, 1616). The dendro-dating of this unusual and important house was clearly desirable and undertaken by the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory. Eighteen samples were taken which showed that the fireplace, first-floor frame, decorative gable, and ground-floor window originated from the primary construction phase. Stone walls, timber frame, and fireplace were thus shown to be contemporary despite the worries about phasing raised by survey. Two precise felling dates were obtained – winter 1570 and summer 1572 – and it is reasonable to suppose that Tŷ-mawr was raised as a storeyed house with fireplace not long afterwards.

4. CARROG-UCHAF (CORWEN) (Fig. 7)

Carrog-uchaf is perhaps the most dramatically downhill-sited house we have ever seen. It is built on a steep hillside overlooking Owain Glyndŵr's Mount, a stone's throw away in the Dee valley below. It appears to be an early-seventeenth-century piecemeal rebuilding of a previous hall-house, which, while retaining something of the earlier tripartite plan of hall between inner and outer room, anticipates the transformation of the hall from chief living-room of the house to entrance vestibule where guests are received before being conducted elsewhere. The main doorway is

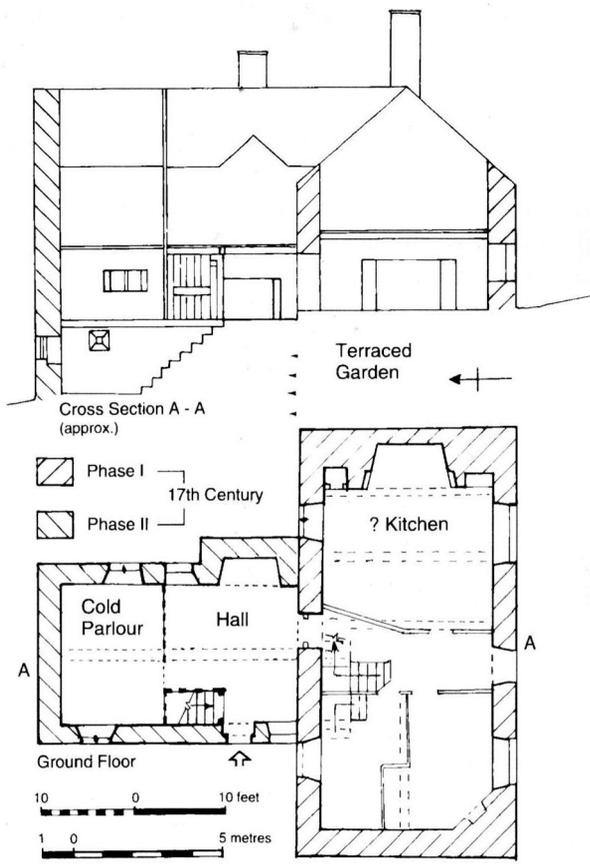


Fig. 7
Carrog-uchaf (Corwen): (top) photograph showing dramatic downhill siting; (bottom left) approximate plan and section showing cold parlour over cellar in the fall of the ground; (bottom right) cyclopean doorway to hall

placed centrally in the hall, and does not give into a cross-passage but onto a spacious room (now used as a kitchen) heated by a large lateral fireplace opposite the doorway. However, if the plan is forward-looking, some of the detailing is quite archaic, notably the splendid cyclopean doorway assembled out of great slabs of slate. Uphill from the entrance hall is a parlour cross-wing, later filled with a central stair-passage for what later became the 'polite' point of entry to the house, while downhill is a cold parlour standing over a cellar reached by a stair from the hall, the cellar easily accommodated in the steep fall in the ground. The use of ovolo-moulded stone-mullioned windows in both hall ranges and cross-wing suggests that they are close in date.

Glenys Davies notes that evidence of bardic patronage is scarce for Corwen. The magnificent setting of Carrog-uchaf surely deserves a poet's eulogy.

5. DÔL-Y-MOCH (FFESTINIOG) (Fig. 8)

This is larger than Carrog-uchaf and imposingly sited across (not down) the slope overlooking gardens sloping away from the main part of the house. Dôl-y-moch now has an U-plan with a hall set between wings. A close examination of the fabric did not reveal evidence for a piecemeal reconstruction of a medieval hall. In plan the house appears to be of three-unit type, but this seems to have been a development from a hall and parlour unit (with enigmatic rear wing) which later incorporated a detached kitchen.

However, there are indications of the hall changing from the main living room into an entrance vestibule as the outer door no longer opens onto a cross-passage and approximates to a central position. From the hall are reached the parlour cross-wing to one side and the kitchen wing to the other, while a rear stair-turret enclosing an extraordinarily massive stone stair arranged in straight flights around a stone column gives on to both the projecting rear wing and the upper floors. Thus, many of the features anticipating later planning were already in place.¹⁵ Certain peculiarities of planning must be noted. The kitchen wing relates oddly to the hall as if it had been originally planned as an independent unit of accommodation recalling the unit system. Have we here a relic of the 'outside kitchen' (much favoured by Lord Raglan) now incorporated within the house? As far as one can tell, to get from the hall to the kitchen (as originally planned) it would have been necessary to step briefly into the open air.

The house was noticed in the Royal Commission's Merioneth *Inventory* of 1921 and our plan is based on that published in the *Inventory* with a few revisions. The *Inventory* account refers to a date inscription of 1643, outlined in white stones on the terrace, but this inscription is no longer visible. It would be, however, a reasonable date for the house which is on two main floors under a dormered loft framed by well-made trenched-purlin collar-beam trusses incorporating raking struts, but without further adornment. The stone walls are unusually massive, three-foot thick, and of slate rubble. The window openings are early or mid-seventeenth century in their proportions, but the mullion-and-transomed wooden windows are later replacements, possibly dating from the restoration of 1910. However, some original

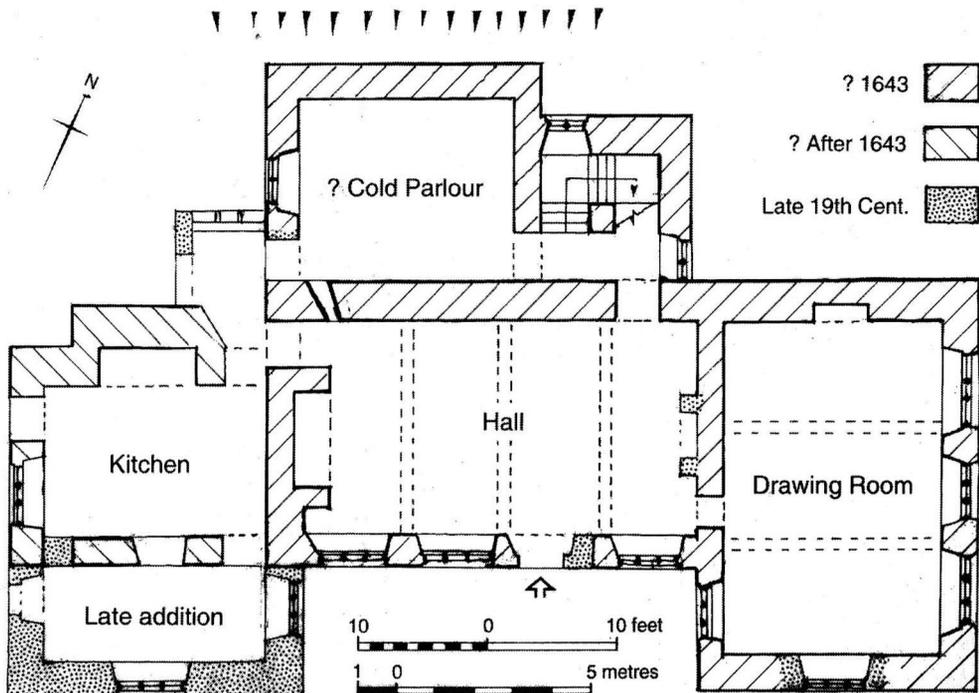
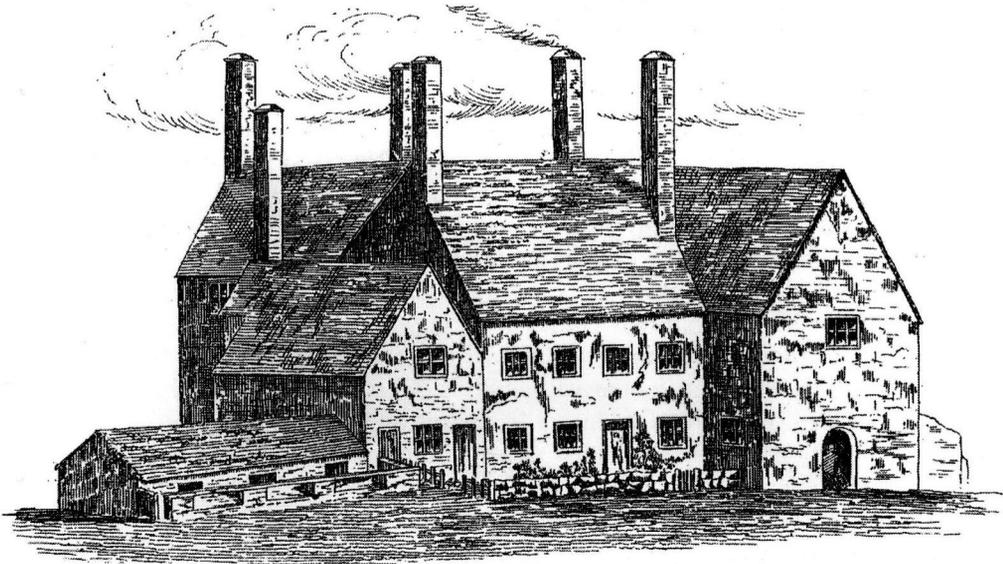


Fig. 8

Dôl-y-moch (Ffestiniog): (top) elevation as recorded in 1882, the round-headed doorway into the drawing-room or parlour is probably a late modification; (bottom) ground-floor plan

quarter-round moulded door-frames survive in the house. From the outside the house with its very tall square chimneys commands attention even amidst the ravishing natural beauty of the Vale of Ffestiniog.

Dôl-y-moch was a major centre of bardic patronage. According to Glenys Davies, Gruffudd Phylip composed a *cywydd moliant* (poem of praise) for Siôn Siôn (John Jones) referring to his rebuilding of the house. Dôl-y-moch is described as 'The fortress of John who spared no expense in its building.' 'Is it not marvellous?', the poet asks. The poet goes on to praise Jones's skill as a lawyer, and it would appear that a legal income helped to sustain the cost of this ambitious *plas*.¹⁶ However John Jones had married Ann, the heiress of the Dôl-y-moch estate, and the new house was raised as a consequence of the marriage. Pride in ancestry and an interest in marriage alliances is apparent in the naïve plasterwork, wholly characteristic of the early or mid-seventeenth century, which is the main ornamental feature of the house. This takes the form of a plaster frieze in the large parlour or drawing-room incorporating the heraldic shields of the royal and noble tribes of north Wales, as well as the coats of arms over the fireplaces of the first-floor principal chambers.¹⁷

6. DOLAU-GWYN (TYWYN) (Fig. 9)

Dalau-gwyn is the last of our "tripartite" houses. It is built in the shape of L, and is arguably the most impressive looking house in Merioneth. It is also a good illustration of the Renaissance aesthetic whereby exterior appearance influenced the interior plan. On the ground floor the plan consists of one wing incorporating the hall, entered from a storeyed porch, and intersected by a second wing incorporating the parlour. The original purpose of the space where the two wings join is far from clear. Opening off the rear of each wing is a projecting stair turret, the smaller opening off the hall formerly contained a winding stair (since removed), while the larger opening off the parlour contains a massive stone stair in straight flights encasing a square stone column.

The house is unusually tall having two floors with a dormered loft above which, springing from well below eaves level, amounts to another complete floor. It is thus an example of height as an assertion of status, and an abundance of armorial plasterwork inside leaves us in no doubt as to the high status of its builder. Although two date inscriptions inside, 1628 and 1656, as well as oddities of the plan, might suggest two major building periods, the exterior stone walls are remarkably consistent. The walls facing the approaching visitor are of massive long slabs of slate approaching ashlar quality; those at the rear are rougher. The gables are all stepped, and the windows are of ovolo-moulded stone mullions and transoms, mostly restored or replaced in a restoration of c.1886 when Dolau-gwyn was featured in *The Building News*. Curiously there is good documentary evidence (noted in the Royal Commission's *Merioneth Inventory*) indicating the house was standing by 1620, implying that the decorated plasterwork incorporating the date inscriptions must be a later embellishment. The builder, Lewys Gwyn, was honoured by no less than ten *marwnadau* (laments) on his death in 1630, suggesting that the bards received a warm reception from a family well known for their patronage.¹⁸

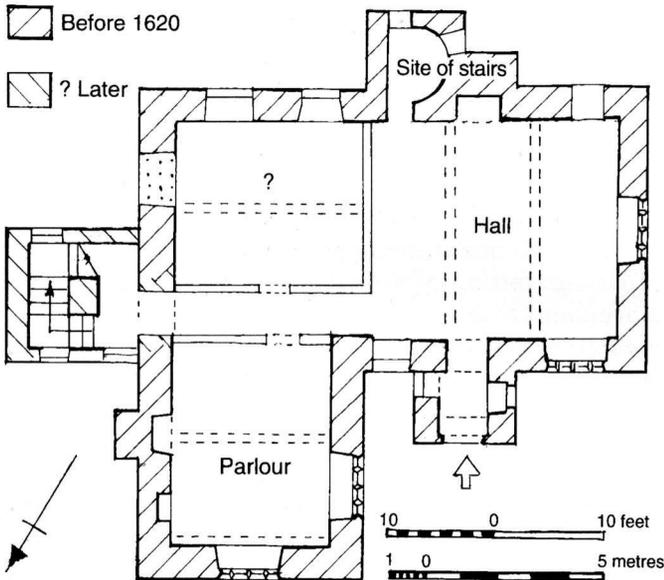


Fig. 9
Dolau-gwyn (Tywyn): (top)
front elevation; (bottom left)
ground-floor plan. The plan
and elevation seem intended
to create a grand impression

7. MAESYGARNEDD (LLANBEDR) (Fig. 10)

Famous on account of its association with John Jones, the regicide, this is a small lateral-chimneyed storeyed house which, though much altered, appears to have consisted of a hall (heated by a lateral fireplace) separated by the cross-passage from a large parlour heated by an end wall fireplace. A winding stone stair by the lateral fireplace gave access to the first-floor chambers. Today a barn, hay-barn, and shed continue the line of the house. But when Moses Griffith sketched the site c.1770 to illustrate Pennant's *Tour in Wales*, he showed the house as a free-standing structure detached from its farm buildings, of which only one is illustrated by Griffith, standing at right-angles to and quite separate from the house. This building still exists, seemingly a byre, and is clearly the only old farm building on the site.

Many Welsh farmhouses are today found where farmbuildings continue the line of the house against which they are butted. These can thus be interpreted as either later additions or as 'alternative reconstructions' of what had once been unitary house and byre structures, the house rebuilt first. In the nature of the evidence it is difficult to prove beyond doubt which of the explanations is correct, but at Maesygarneidd we have irrefutable proof that the range of farm buildings continuing the house are a later addition not a reconstruction. In 1770 Maesygarneidd was a house standing alone, as we think were most of the ancient houses of Merioneth when they were first erected by a class of small landowners. Many eventually became tenanted farms, and it was then we think the farm buildings butting the gable-end walls of the houses were erected.

8. CRAFTNANT (LLANFAIR) (Fig. 11)

Crafnant can be taken as a good example of a late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century house characteristic of Snowdonia belonging to (using Ron Brunskill's terminology) 'the inside cross-passage' family of vernacular houses. It is stone-built, storeyed, with a cross-passage between the hall and outer rooms. It is downhill sited and aligned roughly North-west-South-east. Eighteenth-century and later modifications have not greatly altered the original plan apart from the construction of a modern stair against one of the opposed doorways. In these circumstances it can be very difficult to distinguish a Snowdonian house from its early-modern central stair-passage successor. However the smaller south doorway has a pointed door-head and a drawbar still *in situ*. The hall lies at the upper end of the house; on the other side of the passage is a parlour, but a slight change in floor levels indicate that this room is the usual conversion from two small rooms placed side by side. The hall partition has been replaced by eighteenth-century fielded panelling, but a section of the original post-and-panel partition survives on the other side of the passage concealed by the stair. Other modifications include the removal of the original stone stair at the side of the hall fireplace to provide access to a later dairy with granary above.

The plan and development of Crafnant is not untypical of many houses in north-west Wales. Crafnant is a characteristic Snowdonian house from another point of view. A second domestic range of smaller scale, but still storeyed and of

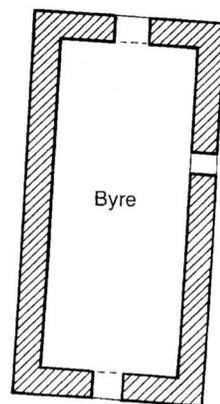
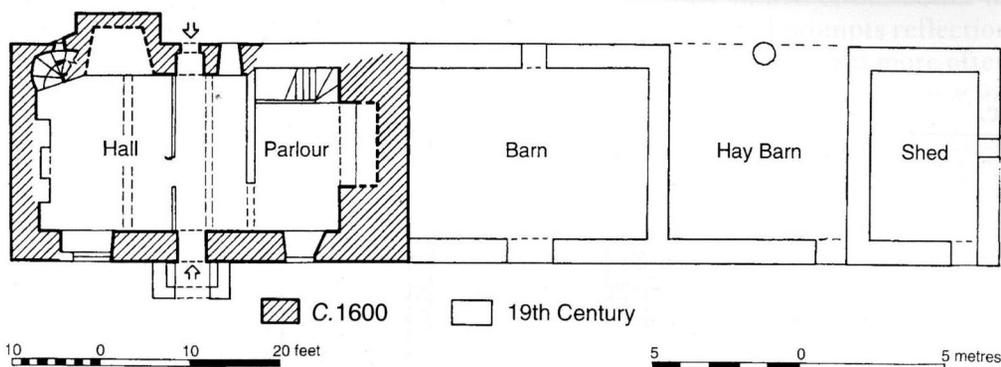


Fig. 10
 Maesygarneidd (Llanbedr): (top) the house as sketched by Moses Griffith c. 1770, then a free-standing building; (middle) plan as standing today; (bottom) as standing today showing the farm buildings in range with the house

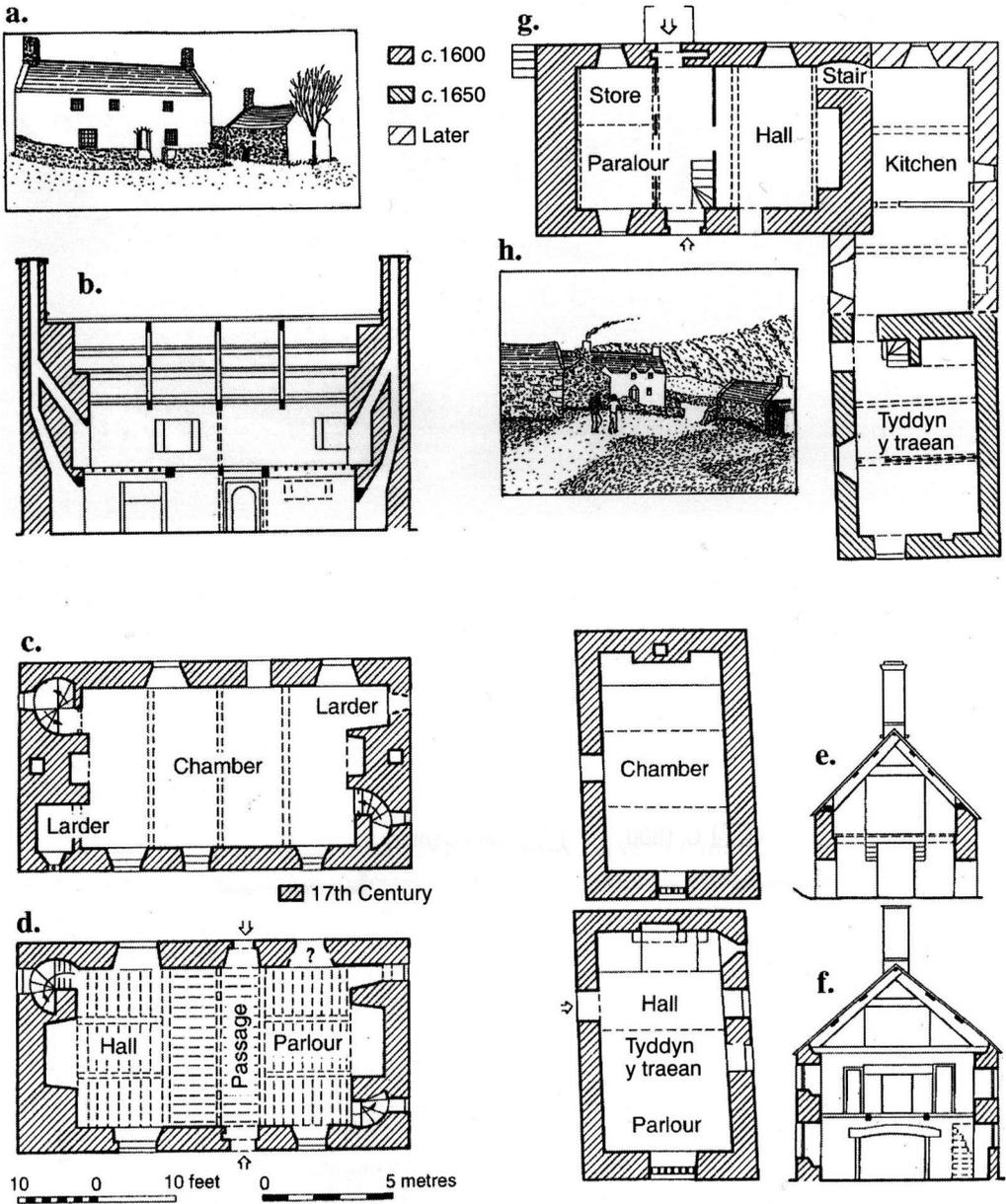


Fig. 11

Llwyn-du (Llanaber) *a-f* and Crafnant (Llanfair) *g-h*: two end-chimney direct-entry Snowdonian houses, each with a dower-house (*tyddyn-y-traean*) alongside. Llwyn-du is unusual in having a large heated room with its own stair at each side of the passage

two units, is set at right-angles to the upper end of the house. This duplication of domestic units is encountered frequently in Snowdonia, and the smaller house is sometimes considered to be the earlier house on the site. The subsidiary ranges are often referred to as bake-houses or kitchens (*cegin allan*: outside kitchen) but it is probable that they had more than one function. Some of the outside kitchens are very well built and more like small houses. Indeed, it is probable that some of these outside kitchens served as diminutive dower-houses for the widowed mother of the eldest son when he succeeded to the estate. A widow was entitled to a third (*traean*) of her dead husband's estate. Pennant in a well-known passage in *A Tour in Wales* (1770) remarked that the 'Tyddyn y Traian or jointure-house' was 'an antient customary appendage to most of the Welsh houses of any note'.¹⁹ This is an appealing idea, but contemporary documentary evidence is often lacking. However, Crafnant, despite its modest size, was a house of note and the centre of a small estate. The deeds relating to the house survive. In the 1787 marriage settlement between John Owen of Crafnant, styled gent, and Elisabeth Jones of Ynysygain, it was agreed that should Elisabeth outlive John, she was to have an annuity of £9 and 'the use of that outhouse called Tu newydd Crafnant for her jointure in lieu of her dower or thirds'.²⁰ This is useful corroboration of Pennant's remarks and prompts reflection that the unit system, first identified in Merioneth, is to be understood more often than not in terms of the provision made for a widow rather than a preference for living together or joint holding by siblings.²¹

9. LLWYN-DU (LLANABER) (Fig. 11)

This house has some features reminiscent of Crafnant, including a rather grander than usual detached dower-house alongside, and it likewise stands quite apart from its farm buildings. It is larger than most houses of its class, but is still of bipartite plan, and seems to anticipate the later evolution of the gable-end fireplace house in that it has a single large room beyond the passage, heated by an end wall fireplace, instead of the usual unheated small rooms. Alongside both ground-floor fireplaces there are winding stairs. There are thus two heated chambers on the first floor each with its own stair access. One wonders what provision was originally made for cooking and storage. Today a small kitchen abuts the rear wall entered directly from the passage, so possibly the builders of Llwyn-du were feeling their way to the plan which later became so popular where living-room/kitchen and heated parlour occupy the main range behind which is the scullery usually reached through the central stair-passage running between the two heated front rooms.

One would like to know if this was the house known to Siôn Phylip who died in 1620. He was the author of a *cywydd gofyn* requesting the gift of a horse from Robert ab Edward of Llwyn-du for Rhisiart Grythor. He clearly approved of Llwyn-du for he describes it as:

Lle a gawn oll i ganu,

A'n lle'n deg yn y Llwyn-du.

(‘A place we can all celebrate, our pleasant place in Llwyn-du.’)

A *cywydd marwnad* by an unknown poet laments the deaths of Robert ab Edward

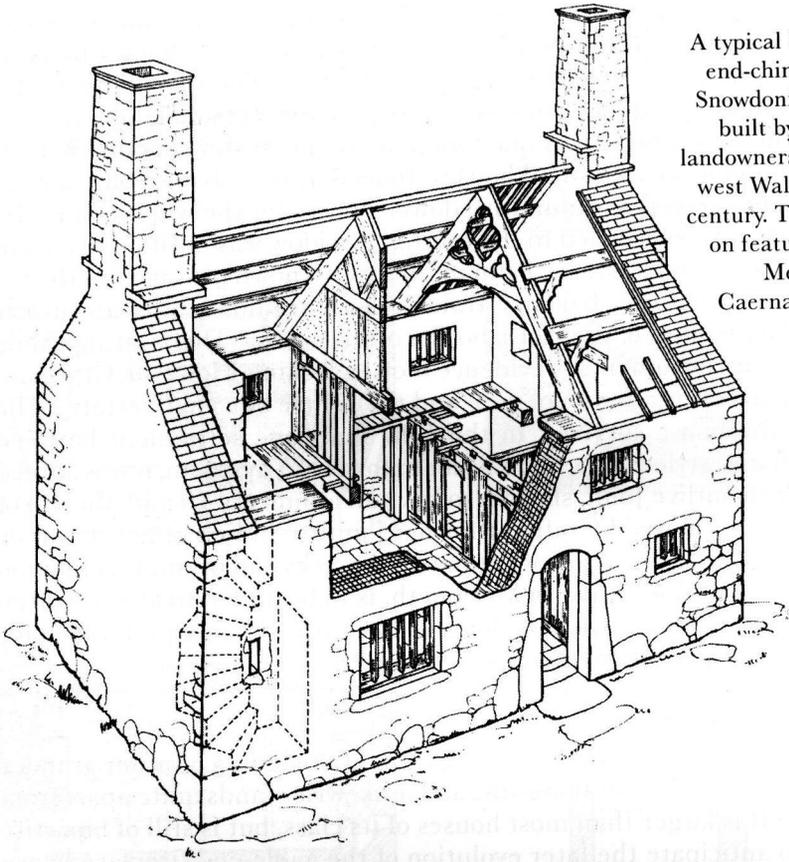


Fig. 12
A typical bipartite, storeyed, end-chimney, direct-entry Snowdonian house of a type built by a class of small landowners emerging in north-west Wales in the sixteenth century. The drawing is based on features found in both Merioneth and Caernarfonshire houses

and his son, Edward, who was a lawyer. Clearly we are moving amongst the upper echelons of Merioneth society which was still thoroughly Welsh in language and culture. The Anglicisation of the gentry has hardly begun.²²

10. BRON-Y-FOEL-ISAF (LLANENDDWYN) (Fig. 13)

We end our Merioneth pilgrimage at Bron-y-foel-isaf. Standing high in the uplands between the sea-plain and the Rhinog mountains, it typifies in many ways the Snowdonian sub-medieval house, although in one curious respect it is unique. The Snowdonian house is quite distinct from many sub-medieval house types that emerged in the rest of Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is very puzzling that a nationally-distributed plan-type (the tripartite open hall-house) should have been replaced by storeyed houses of regional type. The almost complete adherence to the 'Snowdonian' house in Merioneth did not necessarily mean that the county – despite its mountains – was unusually isolated. Indeed, Merioneth folk as soldiers, sailors, and drovers could be very well travelled. Very occasionally

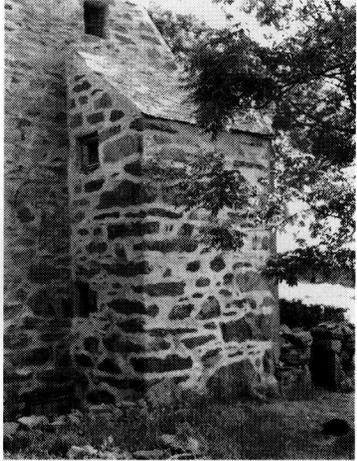
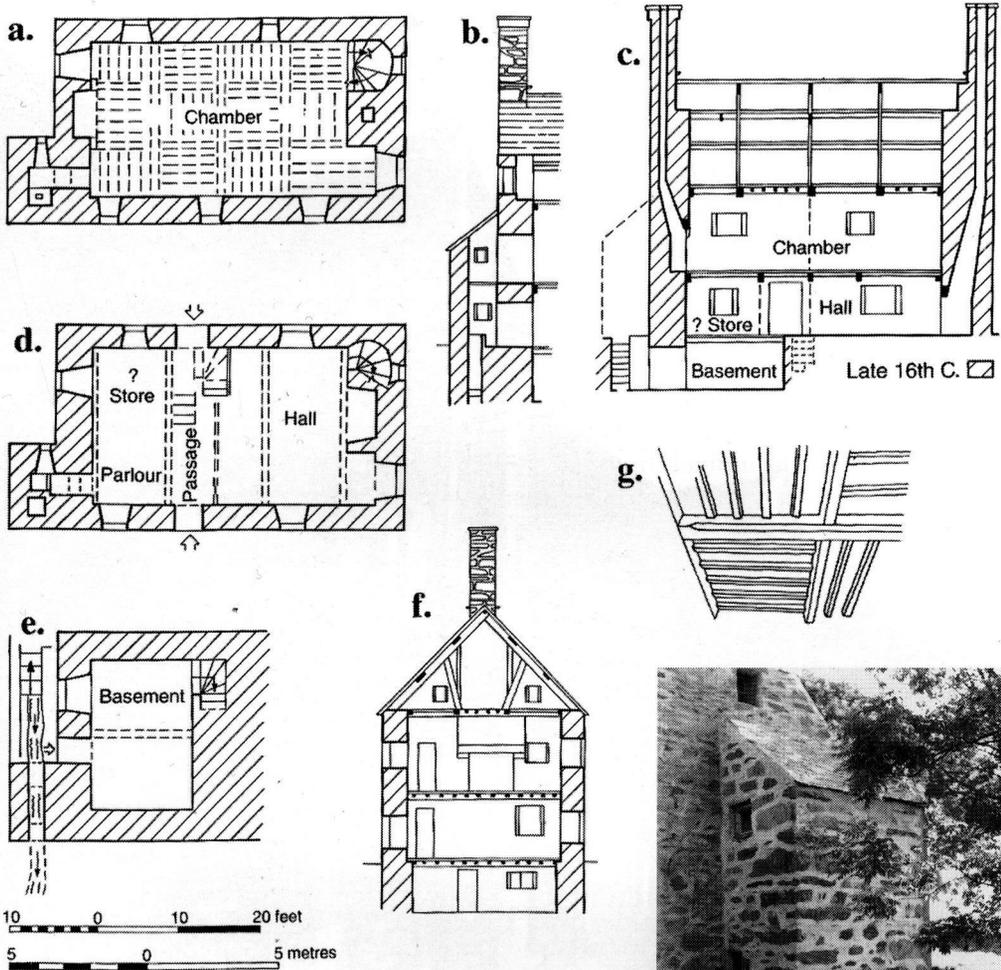


Fig. 13

Bron-y-foel-isaf (Llanenddwyn): one of the more ambitious Snowdonian-type bipartite sub-medieval houses where the winding stone stair carries up to the loft floor; more unusual is the storeyed latrine block opening off both ground-floor parlour and heated first-floor chamber, probably built by William Lewis who became Master of St Cross, Winchester

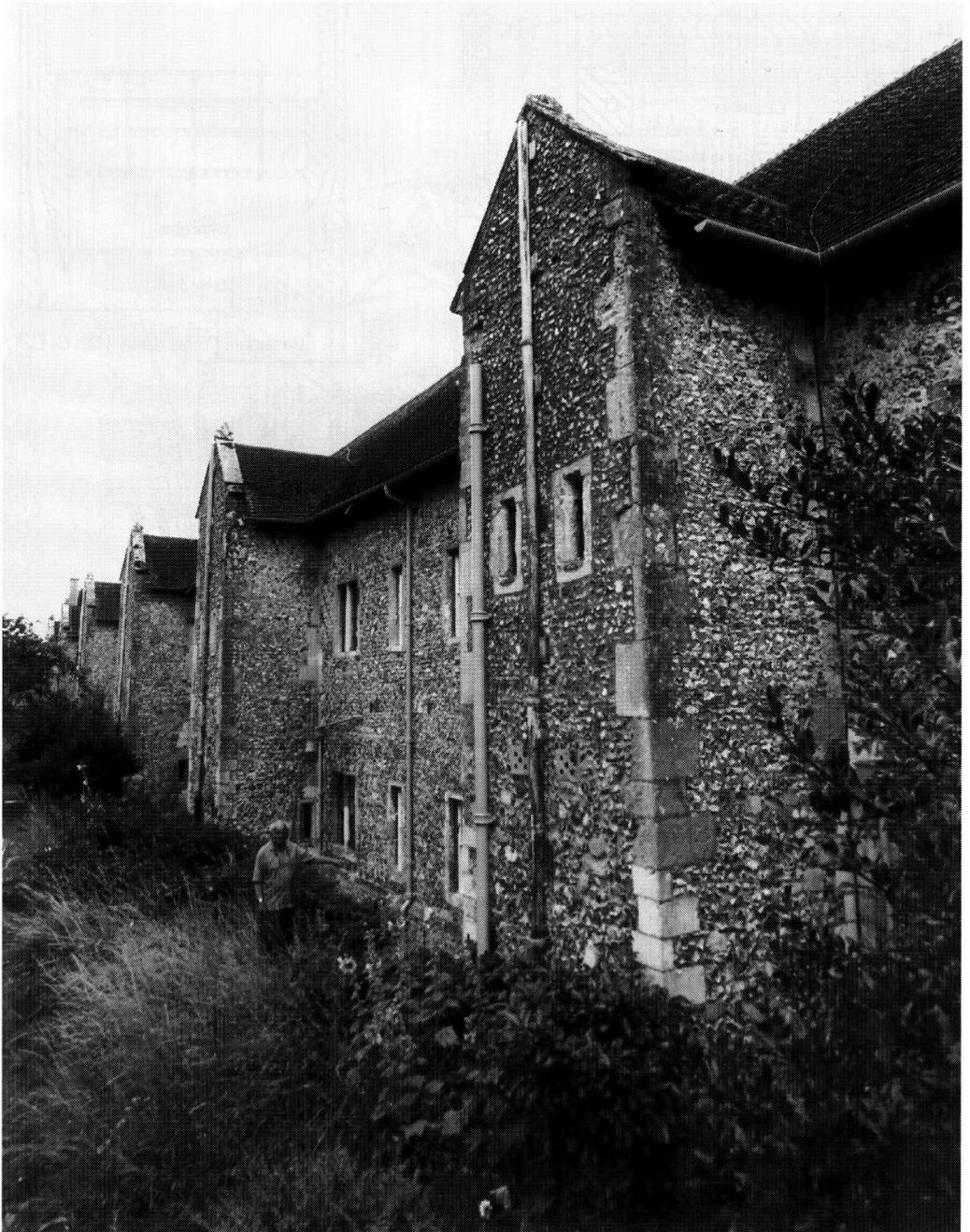


Fig. 14

The rear of the fifteenth-century lodgings range at St Cross Hospital showing the storeyed latrine blocks discharging over a tributary of the River Itchen

within the straight-jacket of the Snowdonian plan-type, the Merioneth house incorporated an architectural feature seen far from the county.

It is clear that although the original partitions are regrettably lost, Bron-y-foel-isaf belonged to the Snowdonian pattern of plan, the earliest example dated by inscription being nearby Uwchlaw'r-coed (also in Llanenddwyn) twice inscribed 1585, and the earliest dated by dendrochronology being Y Garreg Fawr (Waunfawr, Caernarfonshire), now re-erected in the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans, thought to have been built about 1544. Bron-y-foel-isaf is a house of greater ambition than most houses of its type as it has a loft reached by continuation of the stair above the chambers, and an ornate chequer-board ceiling over the first floor. The chamber ceilings provide a floor to the loft, while in the other direction is a cellar below the outer rooms. However, all these features indicating above average wealth and status can be matched in a few other houses of the same group, but one feature is, as far as we know, unique and that is a two-storeyed latrine block projecting from the end wall and providing both the ground-floor parlour and the inner (heated) first-floor chamber with its own latrine discharging over a small stream which ran by the house.

We know of nothing like it in any other Merioneth house. It is locally explained by suggesting a family link with Harlech Castle. However, though Harlech Castle is well provided with latrines none resembles that attached to Bron-y-foel-isaf, but what a study of the pedigrees does reveal is that William Lewis, who inherited Bron-y-foel-isaf from his uncle, was Master of St Cross, Winchester, one of the most desirable livings in the gift of the church. Attached to the fifteenth-century range of lodgings at St Cross (Fig. 14) are a series of storeyed latrine turrets discharging over a tributary of the River Itchen not unlike the storeyed latrine block at Bron-y-foel-isaf. We like to imagine William Lewis enjoying his summer vacation amidst the mountains of Merioneth, far from the cares of ecclesiastical administration amidst the lush meadows of the ancient cathedral city, and deciding that the sanitary arrangements at Bron-y-foel-isaf could be improved!

We feel this is a fitting house to conclude an article dedicated to Ronald Brunskill, who over many years has enjoyed holidays in Harlech away from the cares of teaching architecture to the young students of Manchester. Indeed we hope that Ron will visit the houses described here and challenge our interpretations. Architectural interpretation proceeds both by reasoned argument and by accurate observation, as Ron's numerous publications show.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Brunskill, R.W., *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* (London, 1970), 25-9.
2. We are not the first to note the contrast. As a young lay-preacher, Owen Edwards, a native of Merioneth, was travelling on the then recently opened Aberystwyth to Carmarthen railway and noted the earth-walled houses as if they were something unfamiliar: *Peth rhyffedd i mi oedd y tŷ pridd cyntaf a welson. O bridd y gwneir y tai – fel y bobl – ac y mae golwg hyffryd arnynt pan wedi eu gwyngalchu*. ‘Strange for me was the first earth house we saw. The houses – like the people – are made of earth and look pretty when white washed’. Edwards, O. M., *Tro trwy’r Gogledd, Tro i’r De*, Jones, T., (ed.) (Wrexham, 1958), 184.
3. Brunskill, *op. cit.*, 25-6.
4. Fox, C., & Raglan, Lord, *Monmouthshire Houses, Part I, Medieval Houses* (Cardiff, 1951), esp. 11.
5. Hughes, A.L., ‘Rhai o Noddwyr y Beirdd yn Sir Feirionnydd’, *Llên Cymru*, X (1968-9), 137-205; Davies, G., *Noddwyr Beirdd ym Meirion* [‘The Patrons of the Bards in Merioneth’] (Dolgellau, 1974).
6. Some of these houses have recently been published in the *Merioneth County History, Vol. II, The Middle Ages*, Smith, J.B. (ed.), and Smith, L.B. (Cardiff, 2001), ch. 10. An alternative or more detailed account is offered here.
7. See generally, *Merioneth County History, Vol. II, The Middle Ages*, Smith and Smith, (ed.) 284-5 & 315, for details of the mid-fifteenth-century abbey. The hall may have been built after the abbey was placed under royal protection in 1443 and custody granted to Sir Thomas Stanley, chamberlain of North Wales. The tree-ring date is reported by Miles, D., *et al.* in *Vernacular Architecture*, 27 (1996), 107-9.
8. Parry, B. R., ‘Hugh Nannau Hên (c. 1546-1623), Squire of Nannau’, *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, V (1965-8), 192; Davies, G., *op. cit.*, 28-9. According to Miss Davies, ‘Yr oedd i gerddoriaeth ei lle yng Nghefn-caer’.
9. Cusping in storeyed houses continued until 1580 (Plas Mawr, note 14) and in non-domestic contexts extends until the building of Rug Chapel in 1638.
10. Reported by Miles, D. H., and Worthington, M. J., in *Vernacular Architecture*, 30 (1999), 112-3.
11. National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 287, pp. 1148, 1157; historical information from W[ynne], W.W.E., ‘Anecdotes ... of Society in Merionethshire’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, II (1847), 245-6.
12. Reported in the *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 45 (2001), 94-5.
13. Smith, P., *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (London, 1975 & 1988), 159-61, figs. 102-6, especially fig. 103, maps 29a-b.
14. Tree-ring dating reported by Miles, D. H., and Worthington, M. J., *Vernacular Architecture*, 31 (2000), 112-3. The tree-ring dating has had the merit of simplifying the building sequence suggested by consideration of the somewhat contradictory architectural evidence. One may also note in this connection the surprise if not shock of the dendrochronological demonstration that the archbraced and cusped solar trusses at Plas Mawr were coeval with the main house and were hidden by a plaster ceiling because considered old fashioned by 1573-8.
15. For other instances of this trend at Pengwern (also in Ffestiniog) and Brynddu (Llanfechell, Anglesey), see Smith, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside, op. cit.*, 255.
16. Davies, G., *op. cit.*, 63-7; Jones-Robert, K. W., ‘Historic Houses in Ffestiniog and District’, *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, III (1957-60), 263-74.
17. Photographs in Jones-Robert, K. W., *op. cit.*, plates III.12-3.
18. RCAHMW, *The Inventory of the ... County of Merioneth* (London, 1921), mon. no. 536; *The Building News*, 2 April 1886.
19. Pennant, T., *A Tour in Wales, MDCCLXX* (2 vols, London, 1783-4), II, 126-7.
20. National Library of Wales, Crafnant & Gerddi Bluog Collection, no. 32. *Tŷ newydd Crafnant* = the new house at Crafnant. Cf. also Cwmdwrgi (Uwchgarreg, Montgomeryshire) noted in Croad, S., ‘Recent Emergency Recording’, *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 41 (1997), 105.
21. Hemp, W.J. and Gresham, C., ‘Park, Llanfrothen, and the Unit System’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, XCVII (1942-3), 98-112.
22. Davies, G., *op. cit.*, 141-2.