



Understanding Traditional Buildings

1 Traditional Construction: from 'clom' and thatch to town houses and terraces

This leaflet is about traditional buildings in South-West Wales. It discusses what they are, why they are an important part of Welsh cultural heritage, and why we should all be interested in understanding them better and caring for them properly.



Cover image:
Nant Walters
Cottage
© St Fagans
National History
Museum

Left: Terrace,
Glanaman
Below, left:
New build,
Llandeilo

What is a 'traditional building'?

Traditional buildings are generally defined as those that were built before 1919, with solid (as opposed to cavity) walls, using natural materials including stone, earth, brick, wood and lime (used for mortars, renders and paints).

Traditional methods of construction were widely used in Wales until the early 20th century, so the term 'traditional' covers a huge range of types, styles and ages of building. It comprises cottages, farmhouses and agricultural buildings, industrial buildings, terraced rows, town houses,



churches, chapels and even stately homes and castles. Most of Cadw's listed buildings fall within the 'traditional' category, but many traditional buildings still in everyday use as homes and businesses are not listed.

Why are they important?

The social and cultural history of every area is reflected in its traditional buildings. Although some may not initially seem special or exciting, each one is an irreplaceable element of the Welsh historic landscape.

Modern construction methods produce generic buildings, so a newly built house in Carmarthen might be identical to one in Manchester, Glasgow or Dublin.

The materials and techniques used in traditional construction have created the individual, contrasting and idiosyncratic buildings that help to define the distinctive character of our towns, villages and rural landscapes, and the identity of the communities that live in them.



What does a traditional Welsh building look like?

Most traditional buildings in Wales are a unique mix of locally derived 'vernacular' and more formal 'polite' influences. Architect designed 'polite' styles were first used in houses of the wealthy and grand public buildings, but were gradually adopted and adapted in buildings of the less affluent as local builders interpreted them using their own techniques and the available materials.

Above: Traditional Welsh Cottage,
Castell Cottage, Ystrad Fflur
From the Collections of the National
Monuments Record of Wales

Castles and cottages

Wales is associated in the public imagination with castles. In fact castles are often seen as defining our built heritage. The true icon of Welsh traditional building however, is the cottage.

In their most basic and ingenious form, Welsh cottages are characteristically low walled and constructed of rubble-stone. Where stone was scarce a mixture of earth, straw and animal manure (known in Wales as 'clom') was used for walls. Timber, often 'in the round' provided structural elements, and chimneys were made of wattle covered with a mixture of clay and dung. Thatch composed of locally sourced vegetation – gorse, heather, bracken, reeds and straw was the usual roofing material.



Left: Cwm Eilath longhouse, Llansadwrn
Left, below: Ty'r Celyn longhouse, Llandeilo



Right: Welsh slate rooftops, Llandeilo
Right, below: Three-bay Georgian symmetry, Salem

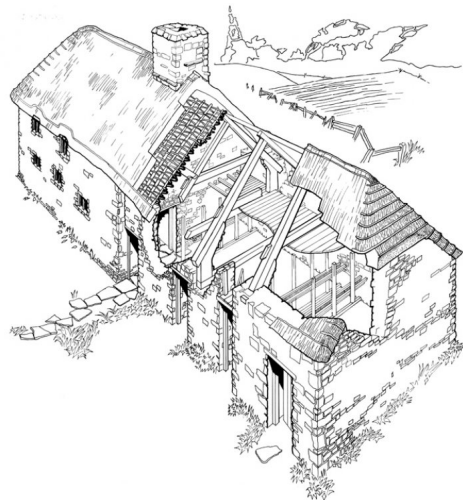
Welsh cottages were not formally designed. They were made by the people who lived in them and the local community, from their combined knowledge and a shared understanding of what a house should be. Far from being poor substitutes for something more elaborate, they made resourceful use of locally available

materials and show an awareness of local environmental conditions which is often lacking from developed building styles. They are a blue-print for sustainable building today – all elements break down and return easily to the landscape from which they were built, and to which they belong.

When abandoned, Welsh cottages do not last long - few surviving examples pre-date the 19th century. However, they represent a building tradition with ancient roots, whose local variants developed over many centuries in relative isolation, and can properly be described as 'Welsh vernacular architecture'.

Change and continuity

Vernacular building traditions survive longest in communities that remain isolated. However, every part of Wales retained a bed-rock of distinctive local



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materials and techniques which continued to colour the character of its buildings. Although more substantial homes do survive from earlier centuries, the largest proportion of domestic traditional buildings in South-West Wales dates from the 19th century.

The Nineteenth Century

The 19th century saw dramatic changes to the Welsh landscape. As industrialisation got under way, and communication networks developed and expanded, new materials, ideas and wealth encouraged widespread rebuilding.

The arrival of the railways made slate quarried in North Wales widely available. This led to a rapid decline in the use of thatch and fundamentally altered the visual character of many Welsh villages and small towns.

Georgian symmetry and proportion saw varying degrees of expression in local buildings. The impact of this architectural influence is demonstrated by the numerous three-bay, stone-built houses with central front door and gable-end chimneys throughout South-West Wales.

The extent of rebuilding at a local level depended on individual circumstances. Although some buildings were wholly rebuilt, occasionally only the visible parts were remodelled, giving a superficial 'face-lift' to an earlier 'core'.





On farmsteads the house was often rebuilt, while older outbuildings were retained. The former farmhouse then became an extra outbuilding.

Poorer farmsteads shared many features of cottage architecture. A lot of these small buildings, particularly in agriculturally marginal areas, were abandoned during the 19th century in favour of the growing industrial centres.

Terraces and towns

The rise of large scale industry led to huge population increases in places that had previously been sparsely settled. The large work-forces involved in mining, metalworking and dock work caused an unprecedented need for social housing.

The resultant Victorian and Edwardian housing boom was characterised by designed 'pattern-book' styles. Terraced rows of houses were set in narrow plots, often in narrow streets with regular building lines where the topography allowed. The character of specific areas and individual streets was defined by the use of uniform styles. More affluent families lived in semi-detached houses designed as symmetrical pairs, or larger detached 'villas'.

Buildings were of stone and brick with slate roofs. The uniform size of bricks enabled the mass-production of identical window and door reveals. Brick was also used decoratively. Because it had been rare in South-West Wales before this period, its prolific use in visible facades of larger buildings was a conspicuous statement of wealth and status.



Character and Fabric

The position and proportion of groups of features, sometimes of different dates, combine to define the character of a traditional building.

Character can be hard to pinpoint, but it is fragile, and easily damaged by 'modernisation' and insensitive building work. The loss of individual elements such as chimney stacks, the replacement of traditional sliding sash windows and wooden doors, the insertion of disproportionately large picture windows all lead to an incremental loss of character.

The best way to preserve a building's character is by allowing it to speak for itself rather than forcing it to make a statement. The natural materials from which traditional buildings are crafted have an innate beauty of their own. Utilising materials and techniques appropriate to your building will ensure that it retains the qualities which make it special and unique.

Why should I find out more about my traditional building?

Despite their cultural importance, many traditional buildings in Wales are damaged through lack of understanding and inappropriate care.

Traditional buildings are arguably more at risk than ever before. Whereas for much of the 20th century, older, less 'desirable' elements of a building were often just covered over, the current trend for radical remodelling has seen the level of intervention in building fabric increase substantially.

Finding out more about your traditional building will help you to understand it, recognise the qualities which make it special, and take care of it properly.

Left: Abandoned farmstead. Ffosfudr Farm, Ceredigion
Above: Terrace, Glanaman



Victorian villa, Llangadog

How do I find out more?

Looking carefully at your building can reveal how it was constructed, how it has been used, and how it has evolved over time. Variations in material and style can suggest the order in which different parts were built.

Earlier elements can survive beneath modifications. Fireplaces and chimneys that were covered over often survive within walls. Old roof timbers and even thatch can survive beneath later roof coverings, earlier floors beneath a levelling layer of cement.

Old photographs, deeds and sale documents can hold clues to your building's past. Historic maps are particularly useful, and can show how it relates to the developing landscape of your area. Your local Historic Environment Record (HER)

and County Council's Records Office hold copies of many historic maps and documents, and can help you find material relevant to your traditional building.

Further Reading

Blundell, C. 2007: *Precious Inheritance. The conservation of Welsh Vernacular Buildings.*
Eurwyn William: *The Welsh Cottage.*
Peter Smith: *Houses of the Welsh Countryside.*
Iorwerth C. Peate: *The Welsh House.*

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