

Peasant Crofts in North Pembrokeshire

by SIR CYRIL FOX

THE Admiralty, having purchased in 1937 an extensive area of land in Llanychaer and adjacent parishes five miles SSE of Fishguard, Pembrokeshire, kindly permitted the National Museum of Wales to examine and make records of any sites or buildings of interest therein.

I visited the local headquarters at Trecŵn in June 1937 for this purpose. The site consists of a narrow valley—at one point a gorge with rocky scarps—and its flanking uplands. The western half is occupied by Trecŵn House, its parkland and village, an estate developed in the English manner and providing little of antiquarian interest. The remainder was largely under different ownership, and, apart from Llanychaer church and farm, both of which are modernized, more primitive conditions survive in it. This portion of the area, which includes the picturesque rock-wall of Graig Lwyd, is shown in FIG. 1. Each rectangle on the map represents a dwelling; and it will be seen that settlement is now confined to the floor and eastern side of the valley. It is of the diffuse type, which contrasts so strongly with the nucleated villages characteristic of England and met with in south Pembrokeshire and other anglicized parts of Wales. If the parish boundaries be examined (shown by a line of dots on the map) it will be seen that most of the houses are in Llanychaer parish, the ancient centre of which, the church, has only one farmstead near it. The shaded (red) portion of the map represents part of the common land (rough mountain pasture) of this and the adjacent parish. The dwellings within the area controlled by the Admiralty are overprinted in red.

Of these, two on the west side of the valley streams, like Llanychaer farm, are modern. The remaining eighteen cottages (including two pairs) the names of which are shown in red on the map, are the subject of this article. They are the dwelling-houses of crofts, small pastoral holdings worked by peasant-tenants. Some are in ruins, many deserted and in various stages of decay—conditions not unhelpful to a survey of this character. Reference should here be made to the courtesy of the

ANTIQUITY

Admiralty representative at Trecŵn, Mr G. P. Lumley, and to the use made of the detailed local knowledge of William Morse, an owner-occupier of a typical steading, born in the district, who accompanied me and my wife throughout the survey.

Ffynnon-goy-uchaf (FIG. 6) may first be noticed, since it provides a typical exterior of a cottage still in occupation, and well looked after. The walls, of coursed rubble roughly squared with large quoins, are whitewashed every spring following the local custom ; the roof of local slate is rendered watertight—and indeed airtight—by a grout of lime mortar or cement renewed when required.* Such cottages show up brilliantly in the sun, dazzlingly white in their rural setting, making the most delightful picture imaginable.

The small size of Ffynnon-goy-uchaf (25 by 17 feet externally), the central doorway, the two small windows with slate sills, and the absence of dormer windows, are characteristic.

The majority of these cottages are on sloping ground, and in such a situation they always face downhill. Thus the backs of the houses are built into the hillside, so that one might step from the garden on to the roof ! Ffynnon-goy-isaf (FIG. 7) is sited in this fashion.

Sometimes on an exposed site the roofs are weighted by slabs of quarried stone, mortared on to the slates down each of the gables, as in FIG. 8, where protection against the winter gales was also afforded by a porch—a late addition to the building, now unroofed. This illustration of Llain-wen-isaf also shows an outstanding feature of the elevation of these cots, the large size of one of the chimney stacks. The back view (FIG. 9) shows another universal characteristic : the small window at the big-chimney end of the house.

The door of any one of these houses opens into the living-room. The most striking sight on entering is the great open fireplace at the gable end, usually, as in FIG. 10, with a later fire-grate and bread-oven built in.¹ This illustration of Cwm-giâr, a cottage in the valley, shows the chimney breast, here a massive beam of ship's timber, high above the floor. The fireplace with its inner flanking wall normally occupies two-thirds of the width of the house. FIG. 11, of Carn-deifog-fach,

* Mr Morse remarks that the older method, liming, is preferred to cement, though it is not so weatherproof ; for while a gale may loosen half-a-dozen slates on a lime-washed roof, a square yard or more of cement roof may under similar conditions be carried clean away.

¹ See Iorwerth C. Peate in *ANTIQUITY* 1936, p. 458, for an interesting comment on this practice.

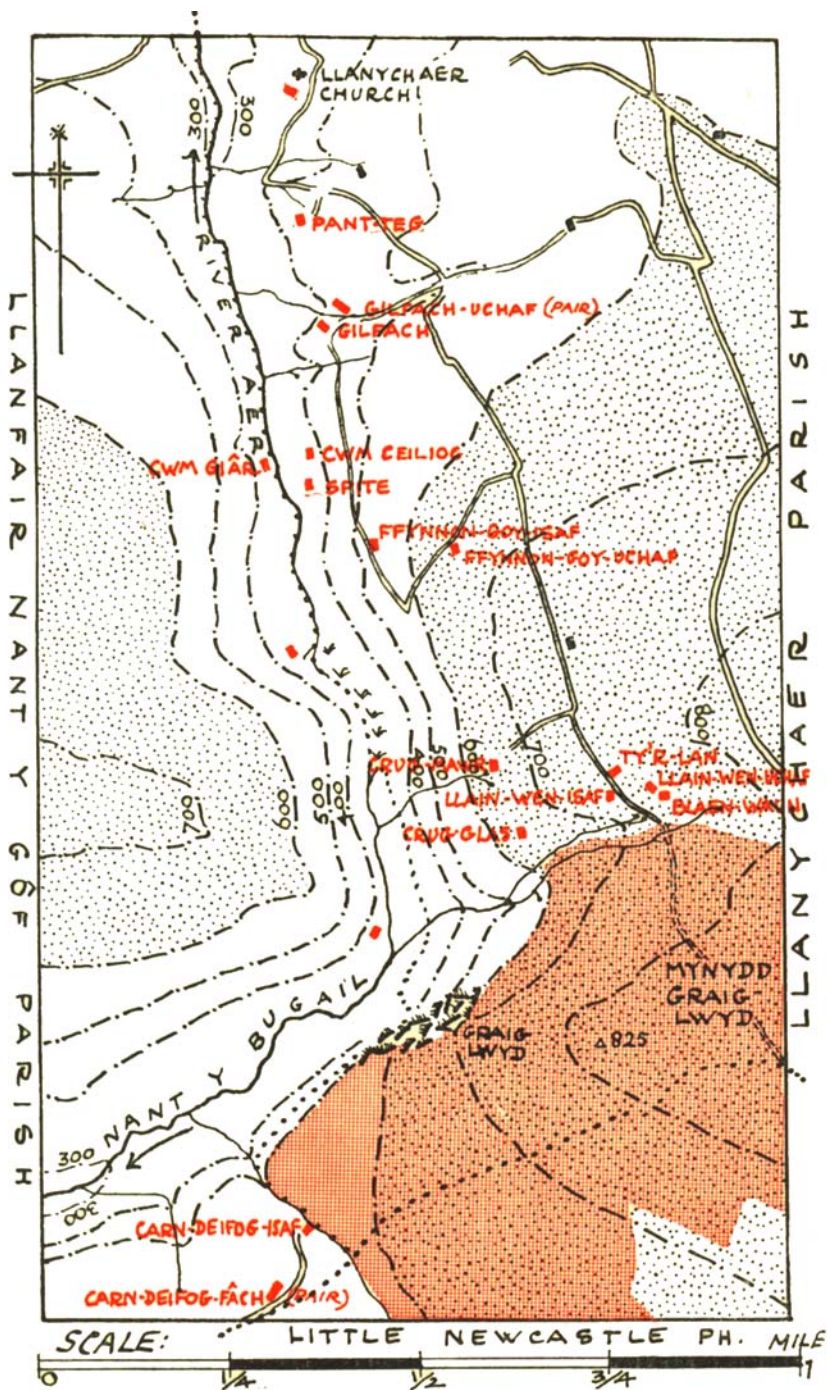


FIG. 1. MAP OF THE AREA: open moorland, and crofts referred to, are shown in red
(Based on the Ordnance Survey Map, by permission of H.M. Stationery Office)

ANTIQUITY

illustrates its relation to the doorway (on the right) and to the little back window (on the left) to which reference has already been made.

In dealing with interiors as they are lived in, one must resort mainly to descriptions, plans, and sections; the structures are so small that only in deserted houses with gutted and ruined interiors can one stand far enough back to obtain satisfactory results with the camera. The picture of Carn-deifog-fach (FIG. 11) for example was taken from the further corner of the bedroom looking towards the living-room. It may be noted that in this building there is no trace save on the wall-plaster, of the partition—a flimsy wooden structure—which formerly divided the rooms. The outer walls and the chimney-piece are in fact the only parts of these cottages likely to survive prolonged neglect.

We turn then to measured drawings, and FIG. 2 shows the plan of Llain-wen-isaf,² the exterior of which has already been illustrated. The house—when examined in June 1937—had only recently been deserted, and retained all its fixtures. The living-room, which is entered from the central doorway through a short passage ceiled with boards, is open to the roof; the passage is formed by the bedroom partition on one side, and on the other by a fixed screen,³ some 7 ft. high, which keeps the draught away from the house-place in front of the hearth. The fire of culm, a mixture of clay and coal dust, formerly burned on the floor, but a small grate has as usual been built in at a later date. The chimney being central to the gable, the smoke is directed inwards diagonally up the back of the hearth; this renders the 'chimney corner' on the further side in every respect a comfortable sitting place. There is a shelf just above it in the thickness of the wall. The roof of the ingie is roughly corbel-vaulted.

The recess at the other end of the gable is shut off from the kitchen by a wooden partition and ceiled 'to keep away the dust'. It is the dairy, lighted by the little window seen in FIG. 9. A mere box, it measures 5½ by 4½ ft., thus illustrating the tiny scale of the farm and its slender resources. In front of the dividing wall between dairy and hearth—indeed a projection from it—is a small semicircular stone

² In this, the northern part of Pembrokeshire, Welsh is universally spoken, and the place-names are, for the most part, compounds of known Welsh words. Llain-wen-isaf for example means the Lower white strip (of land); its neighbour is the Upper white strip. Cwm-ceiliog is the valley or hollow of the cockerel; Cwm-giâr, the valley of the hen.

³ This is not a normal feature of the houses; like the porch it was probably put up by the tenant to keep out the southwest wind driving up the cwm.

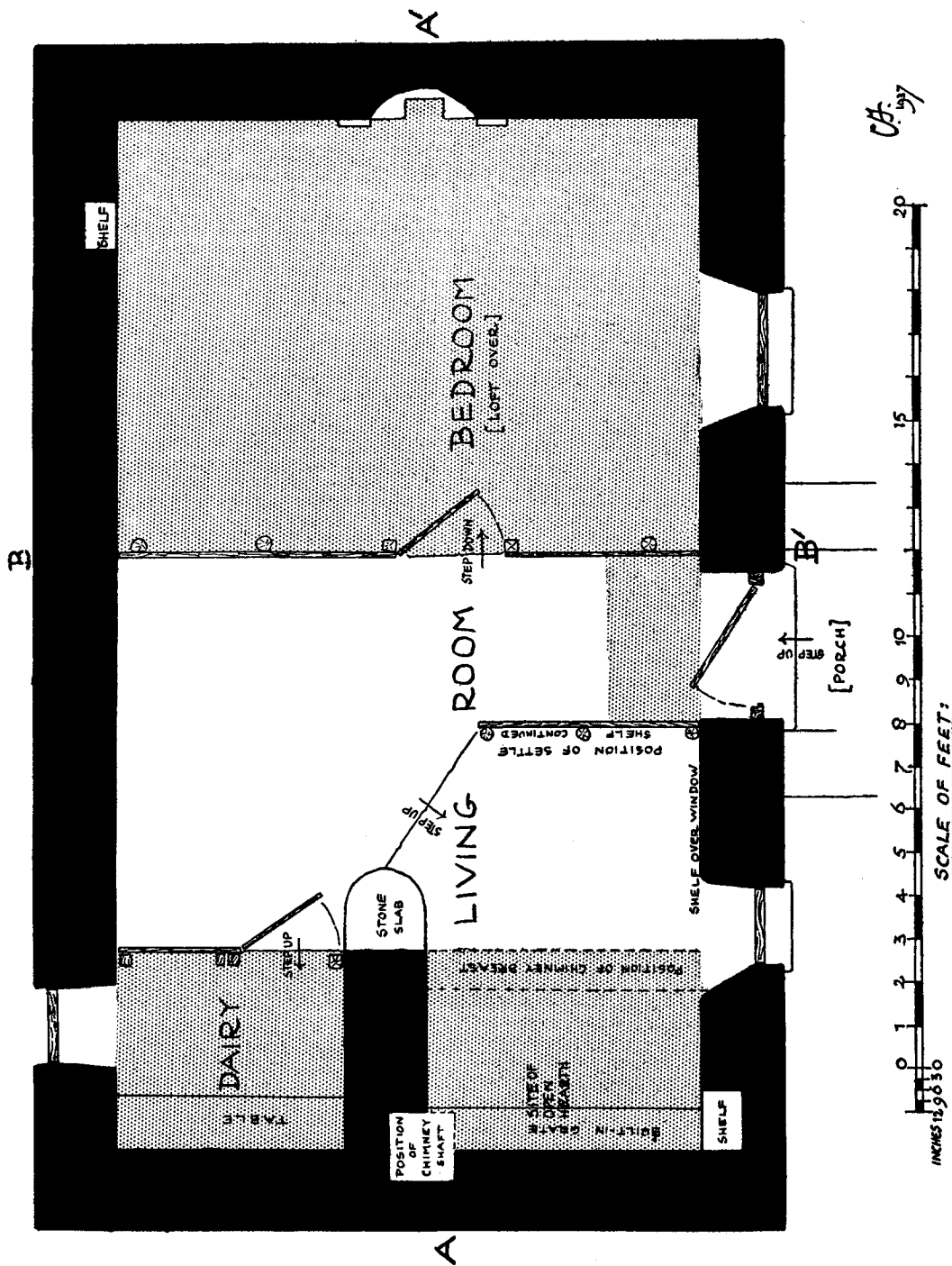


FIG. 2. LLAIN-WEN-ISAF: Plan
(The stippled area is ceiled—or vaulted; the rest open to the roof)

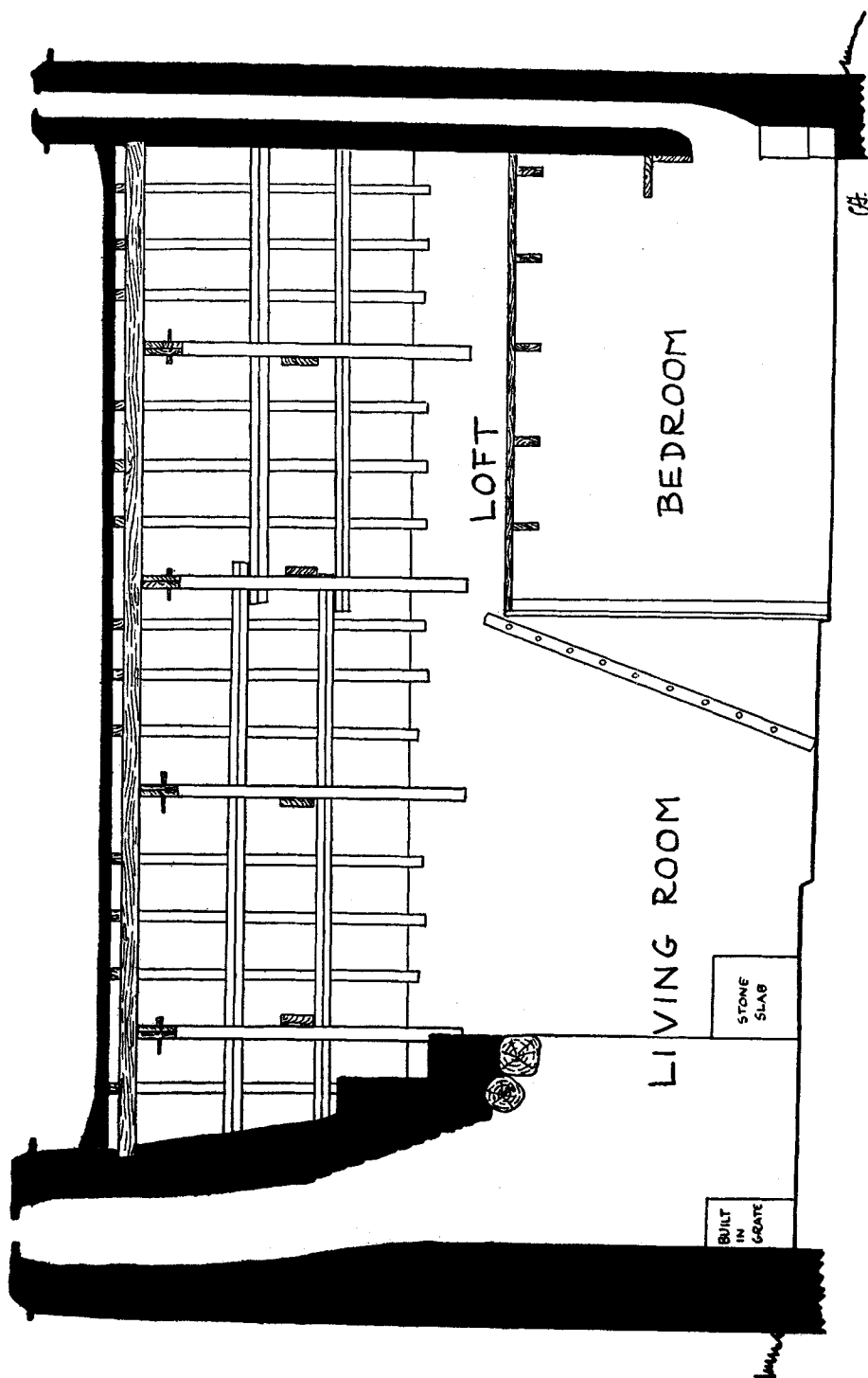


FIG. 3. LLAIN-WEN-ISAF : longitudinal section, line A-A' on plan
Scale as Fig 2

PEASANT CROFTS IN NORTH PEMBROKESHIRE

bench (*fainc*) used as a stand for the washing bowl and for culinary purposes generally. This is well seen in the interiors, FIGS. 10 and 11.

The bedroom, ceiled by 6 by 2 joists and wide boards, shows a tiny grate; there is a shelf in the wall where the bed was placed, as that in the living room is over the chimney corner.

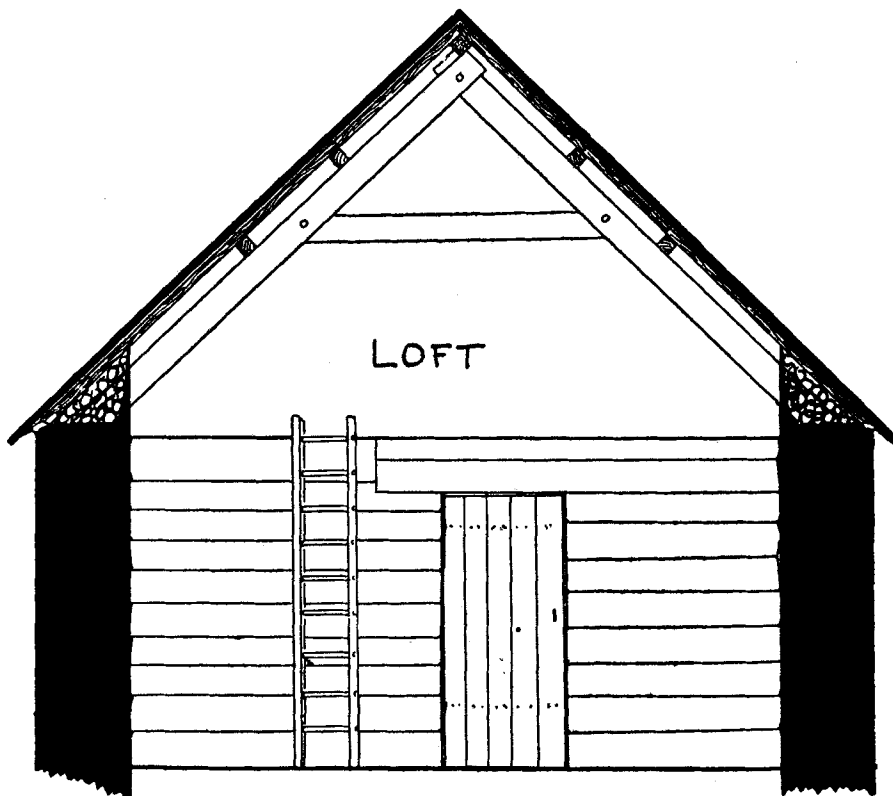


FIG. 4. LLAIN-WEN-ISAF: cross-section, line B-B on Plan. Scale as FIG. 2

The interior of the house was papered, living-room and bedroom (a minor intrusion of urban standards); the hearth-place was colour-washed with the back of the hearth 'tarred to hide the smoke-stains', and the dairy was whitewashed. The floor was originally of stone slabs, but the bedroom and part of the living-room had recently been provided with a cement floor.

Over the bedroom is the loft. This can best be studied in the longitudinal and cross sections (FIGS. 3 and 4). Its floor is of course

ANTIQUITY

the ceiling of the bedroom and is 7 ft. above the living-room floor ; it forms a dark and airless triangular space the apex of which is the roof-ridge, with no rail or other protection along its open edge. It forms, normally and by custom, a second sleeping apartment, and is reached by means of a movable ladder. Occasionally the loft is boarded up making it even darker and more airless. FIG. 13 shows (with the distortion unavoidable in a photograph) the square hole at Ffynnon-goy-isaf by which the enclosed loft in this cottage was entered. Mr Morse remembers five children living here with their parents, and the boarding (which is a later addition to the structure) was probably added for safety. It may be noted that the living-room window of this house (just visible in FIG. 7) was only 18 inches square ; that of the bedroom a little larger.

The roof construction of these cottages is simple. It consists of three or four main trusses of elementary form with collar-beams, pinned together with treenails ; their overlapping (and flush) upper ends forming a notch in which the ridge rests. This is well seen at Blaen-waun (FIG. 14) and is a technique frequently met with in Wales from medieval times onwards.

The construction thereafter, with purlins and common rafters, follows the usual practice. The customary angle of slope approximates to 45°. The general appearance from inside is well seen in FIG. 15, the roof of Carn-deifog-isaf. These roof-trusses are coeval with the building ; but the roofs of the cots in general are flimsy and poor, and in consequence many are seen to be replacements.* This flimsiness is, as the plan and sections suggest, characteristic of all the carpentry in the building, contrasting strongly with the massive masonry of the walls. The windswept character of the country, making long and straight timber difficult to obtain, is probably sufficient to account for the lack of a good tradition in woodwork.

An interesting feature of the roof construction is the care taken to eliminate draughts. When the roof has been completely framed the walls are built up (' beam filling ') so that the ends of the main trusses, and sometimes the lower parts of the common rafters, are embedded in the sloping wall-tops (FIG. 4).

Similar technique is employed over the open fireplace, the upper surface of its corbelled vault forming an even slope on which the common rafters are laid and sometimes embedded. This feature is

* In the Sections (FIGS. 3 and 4) a measured drawing of a typical original roof has been inserted, since the existing roof at Llain-wen-isaf is modern.

PEASANT CROFTS IN NORTH PEMBROKESHIRE

well shown in FIG. 14 of Blaen-waun and FIG. 16 of Cwm-ceiliog. Moreover when the slating is finished the internal face of the wall is plastered up to the slates, as shown in FIG. 15, and in the sections (FIGS. 3 and 4) ; and since the roof was grouted externally (p. 428) it was completely airtight. Only by such devices could an inadequately heated interior open to the roof be made habitable in a wet and windy countryside.

The reader will have noticed that the Llanychaer cottages are singularly uniform in their construction and internal and external features. They are, however, of different dates, and vary in detail. A study of these minor differences enables fourteen of the houses to be brought into a rough sequence; these are listed in the TABLE (p. 440). In our first group the masonry is of early character ; the walls are built of boulders, some unhewn, others roughly faced, packed and wedged with slivers of stone ; there is moreover no lime-mortar, save in the chimney construction. These characters are shown in FIG. 16. Each house has one hearth only. Next comes a group also with one hearth, but with masonry of quarried stone roughly coursed, with squared quoins ; Blaen-waun (FIG. 14) is a good example. The two examples of paired houses in the area come into this group ; one pair, Carn-deifog-fach, has a window at the back as well as the front.⁵ A third group, represented by the illustrations of Llain-wen-isaf (FIGS. 8, 9), has a second chimney ; the window- and door-heads in this group are sometimes of brick, and the loft may be boarded up.

The fourth group has the exceptional amenity of a window in the gable, to light the loft ; it also has a heavier overhang to the eaves (the common rafters project) and higher walls, the wall plate being 8 to 9 ft. up, as against a normal 6 to 7 ft. (see FIG. 17 of Carn-deifog-isaf).

That this sequence—the latest member of which probably dates from about 1800—represents a cultural succession is almost certain ; that it represents a chronological succession is also probably true, with reservations. The use of the gritty earth of the district for binding material points to a time when lime mortar was very difficult to obtain,⁶

⁵ This pair of houses is on level ground, and the variation from the normal may not have much significance. The occurrence of paired houses represents, I think, a definite intrusion of urban ideas into this countryside, probably in the 18th century ; rows of two-roomed cottages are not uncommon in the older parts of Pembrokeshire townships.

⁶ Dr F. J. North points out to me that in George Owen's 'Description of Pembrokeshire' (1603), there is a reference to the contemporary scarcity of lime in North Pembrokeshire—'in *Kemes, Killgarran, & Dewisland* where the lyme wanteth, . . . they vse mortar of Clay or erth to make their stone walles . . . (ed. H. Owen, 1892, p. 78).

ANTIQUITY

and it can hardly be coincidence that five out of eight houses in our first two groups are thus constructed. The use of earth as mortar still persists, but it is now used, Mr Morse tells me, only for cowhouses, pigsties and such-like buildings—'It sticks well when it is wet'. That the majority of the ruined examples fall into the first half of the sequence also suggests that this sequence is chronological.

These variations then, being all in the nature of improvement, economy, or increased convenience, represent the impact of the developing civilization of Britain on a remote and isolated peasant community.

Nothing, however, has emerged from their study to induce us to modify our original conclusion: the uniformity of type remains the most interesting and important feature of the cottages. This uniformity extends to size; the measurements given in the Table show how limited is the variation. The fourteen buildings range in internal length only from 19 ft. 1 in. to 27 ft. 1 in., and in breadth from 12 ft 5 in. to 13 ft. 8 in. Thus we are studying the material aspects of a permanent and fixed tradition and way of life—the demands of those bred in it were practically unchanging from generation to generation.

One further point of some interest arises. So strong was until recently the cultural tradition that these cots represent, that a house of two stories in the area—Pant-teg, of mid-xix century date—has the ground-plan we have described only slightly modified. The dairy recess is there—but it is occupied by the staircase, the dairy being in a lean-to. The ingle-nook remains with its high chimney breast; there is a built-in hearth. When this house was built, 'by two sailors for their parents', Mrs Phillips, the present occupier, informed us, 'it was looked upon like a castle by the rest of the people'.

Though the majority of the cottages face downhill, as has been said, the rule is not invariable. On fairly level ground, the principal front may face in any direction. Whether such grouping as exists in the area, in particular at the head of Nant-y-Bugail (see FIG. 1, Map) was due to desire for propinquity, to the nearness of the 'common',

⁷ There is one large farmhouse in the neighbourhood of the cottages, Garn, in Llanychaer parish. It is round-chimneyed, a (medieval?) structure of the type described by Romilly Allen (*Arch. Camb.*, 1902, p. 1 ff.). Its arrangement is essentially that of the cots; the accommodation is on two floors at one end, at the other is a living room open to the roof. The entrance passage is in the middle.

PEASANT CROFTS IN NORTH PEMBROKESHIRE

or to the existence of numerous springs of fresh water and a stretch of fertile ground at this spot, I am not prepared to say.

The cots are the habitation of crofters, and a typical inhabitant is shown in FIG. 19, with his 'Irish' spade, significantly the only form of this tool used in Pembrokeshire, on his shoulder. Each cottage has associated with it a cow-shed and pigsty, and sometimes a little cart shed, pony shed or fowl-house, and a culm store—the latter a small

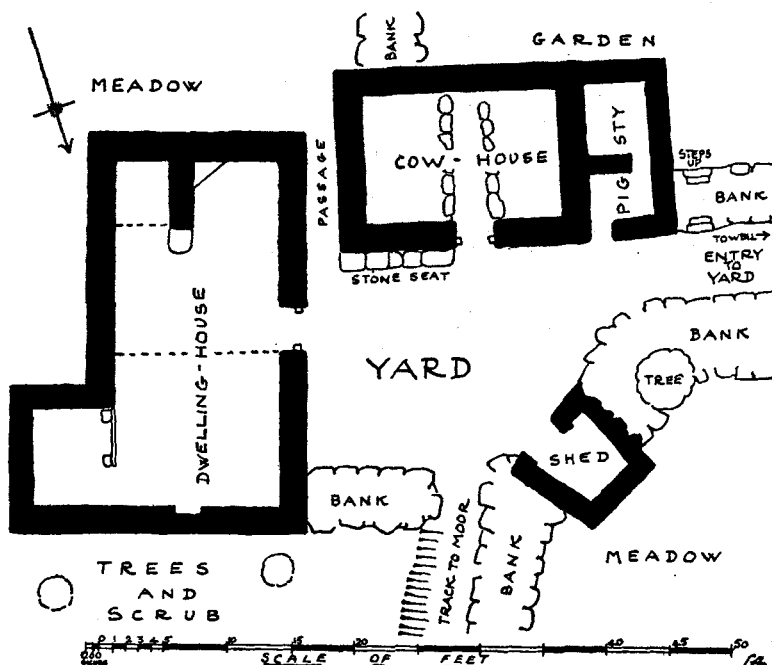


FIG. 5. CARN-DEIFOG-ISAF: sketch plan of the Steading

oval dry-walled receptacle. Privies are entirely unknown. There is no regular arrangement of the outbuildings; the cow-shed may be built on to one gable end of the cottage as at Ffynnon-goy-isaf (FIG. 7) or separate from it as at Carn-deifog-isaf. This latter, as being the most compact of all the steadings, is planned in FIG. 5, and illustrated in FIGS. 17, 18. The small scale of the yard is shown by the fact that the photograph (FIG. 17) was taken from its furthest corner! The thick high boundary walls of earth revetted with stone, shown on the plan, are a feature of the field divisions in Pembrokeshire.

ANTIQUITY

Each croft has several small grass fields, and a garden ; there is no ploughland. The general setting, and the geographical relation of many to the moorland which borders the settlement, is well shown in FIG. 12—Carn-deifog-fach. Each crofter has the valuable right of grazing sheep on this moorland, which is a part of the great Presely upland, and covers well over a thousand acres in Llanychaer parish alone. The rent of an average holding with 6 acres of land was, Mr Morse told me, £11.

Though primitive, the Llanychaer cottages are not ancient. I doubt if any one of them, even the most ruinous, can be more than three centuries old ; and in some respects—the masoncraft of the vaulted ingle-nook and the sloping chimney shaft of all the houses, the paired construction of four, and the secondary fireplace of many—the technique is sophisticated. But the sophistication they show is but partial ; primitive elements survive, indeed dominate the design. In essence, we are studying small rectangular structures open to the roof, each with a hearth. Nothing could be simpler—except a round hut, and that form was dying out in Wales in Roman times.⁸ Furthermore, the partitions, which are obviously a secondary development, provide as we have seen a remarkably primitive feature, the loft which extends over only half the interior.

This N. Pembrokeshire house-type represents then in its simplicities primary and secondary, an ancient tradition ; it is a survival into modern times of the core round which the peasant culture, in one of its numerous forms, so significant for Welsh history, was built up. I say ‘ in one of its numerous forms ’, for though the two-roomed cottage is, or was, widely distributed in Wales, the building technique and the lay-out we have described has a much more limited spread ; as far as my knowledge goes it is coastal, and west coastal at that. My colleague Mr Iorwerth Peate is working on the geographical distribution of the various types of Welsh houses, and exact information on such points as this will in due course be forthcoming.⁹

Mr Peate suggests, and I agree, that constructional technique is largely conditioned by environment, and Pembrokeshire features—such as the grouted slate roofs—may therefore be a late development. But this is not the case with lay-out ; such spatial relationships as that of dairy to hearth, so constant in our house series, are, I suggest, not

⁸ It survives today, I think, only in the ‘ Welsh pigsty ’.

⁹ See his paper ‘ Some Welsh Houses ’, *ANTIQUITY* 1936, x, 448 ff.

PEASANT CROFTS IN NORTH PEMBROKESHIRE

superficial or recent, but ancient and fundamental, linked to customary procedure in the basic activities of human life. Differences in these relationships represent, on this view, very early cultural divergence. If this be true the Pembrokeshire cottages represent one of the many strands of culture which in the Dark Ages or earlier went to the making of the social and economic pattern of rural Wales, which lasted so long and which is now so rapidly breaking down.

Furthermore, these cottages represent a regional type of a well-known house-form of wide distribution in south-western and northern England, and in Scotland ; they are also characteristic of Ireland, to go no further afield. Whether this spread is due to powerful influences operating along the western sea route, or to the survival in the Highland Zone of Britain of primitive forms and a social class extinct or nearly so in the Lowland Zone is an interesting problem. Clearly it is urgently necessary, as a basis for the scientific study of the social anthropology of Britain, that the two-roomed cottage should be measured, planned and described in all its variations, and that the range of these variations should be plotted. Urgently necessary ; because though these house-types are at present common enough, in Wales at all events, recent legislation, applicable to Britain generally, is hastening their destruction by imposing standards of accommodation which must eliminate their special—and for our purposes vitally important—features.

This destructive process is aided by a tendency even more powerful—the movement of the young people away from the out-of-the-way places where the cottages best survive. Of eighteen cottages visited and measured at Llanychaer in the course of the present survey, only three were still inhabited ; it is still more significant that of the fifteen unoccupied cottages, seven had been deserted within the last few years. That this refusal of a traditional mode of life is primarily due to primitive conditions in the cottages is improbable ; rather, it is the croft system that has broken down in the area. We must suppose that the life is too hard, the rewards too slight, the inconveniences of isolation too manifest. The croft cannot today yield a ‘ living ’, Mr Morse tells me, in his district.

The reader may think that the plans and descriptions in this article of a Llanychaer cottage are unnecessarily detailed. I would plead that this is done ‘ as some defence against the march of Time ’. Such a cottage as Llain-wen-isaf ought long ago to have taken its place in a series of the primitive dwellings of Wales in a National Open-Air Museum, but such a folk-museum seems as far from realization as

ANTIQUITY

ever ; and the best that can be done today is to make a record sufficiently detailed to permit students, in a more enlightened age, to reconstitute a ruined or altered example. Only ruined or altered examples are likely then to remain.

TABLE

Analysis of fourteen cottages in North Pembrokeshire

(The measurements are internal, overall)

GROUP A. One hearth : early masoncraft.

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. | Crug-glas (ruin)* | 20 ft. 1 in. by 12 ft 5 in. |
| 2. | Cwm-ceiliog (ruin)* | 22 ft. 9 in. „ 13 ft. 3 in. |

GROUP B. One hearth : rubble roughly coursed, squared quoins, stone or wood lintels

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3. | Spite (ruin)* | 20 ft. 5 in. by 12 ft. 11 in. |
| 4. | Blaen-waun (unroofed)* | 23 ft. 1 in. „ 13 ft. 5 in. |
| 5. | Gilfach-uchaf A (ruin)* | 19 ft. 1 in. „ 13 ft. 0 in. |
| 6. | „ „ B (ruin)* | 21 ft. 0 in. „ 12 ft. 9 in. |
| 7. | Carn-deifog-fach A | 24 ft. 6 in. „ 12 ft. 7 in. |
| 8. | „ „ „ B | 22 ft. 11 in. „ 12 ft. 8 in. |

GROUP C. Second fireplace : window and door-heads sometimes of brick

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 9. | Ty'r-lan† | 21 ft. 3 in. by 13 ft. 2 in. |
| 10. | Llain-wen-uchaf (partial ruin) | 26 ft. 0 in. „ 13 ft. 2 in. |
| 11. | Llain-wen-isaf | 23 ft. 10 in. „ 13 ft. 8 in. |
| 12. | Ffynnon-goy-isaf† | 22 ft. 8 in. „ 13 ft. 6 in. |

GROUP D. Refinements additional to second fireplace‡

- | | | |
|-----|------------------|------------------------------|
| 13. | Cwm-giâr | 22 ft. 0 in. by 13 ft. 4 in. |
| 14. | Carn-deifog-isaf | 27 ft. 1 in. „ 13 ft. 4 in. |

* In these buildings lime mortar was used only for the hearth and chimney construction.

† Loft recently boarded up, with hole for entry.

‡ Higher walls : heavier overhang to eaves (common rafters project) ; window to loft (in gable). Carn-deifog-isaf has also a small lean-to.

PLATE I



FIG. 7. FFYNNON-GOY-ISAF : exterior, front (see pp. 428, 434, 437)

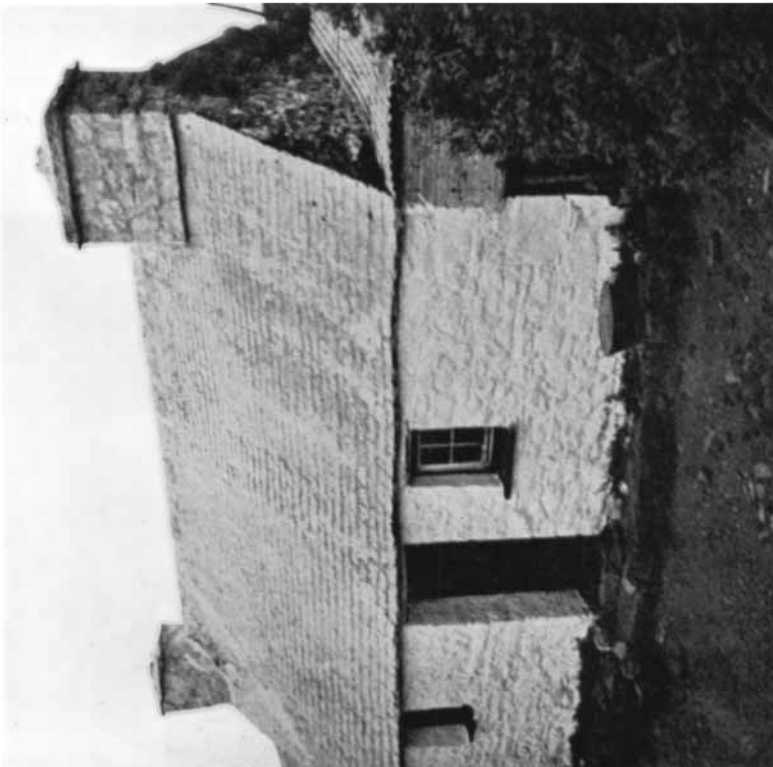


FIG. 6. FFYNNON-GOY-UCHAF : exterior, front (see p. 428)
MCS. 6-19 ph. National Museum of Wales

PLATE II

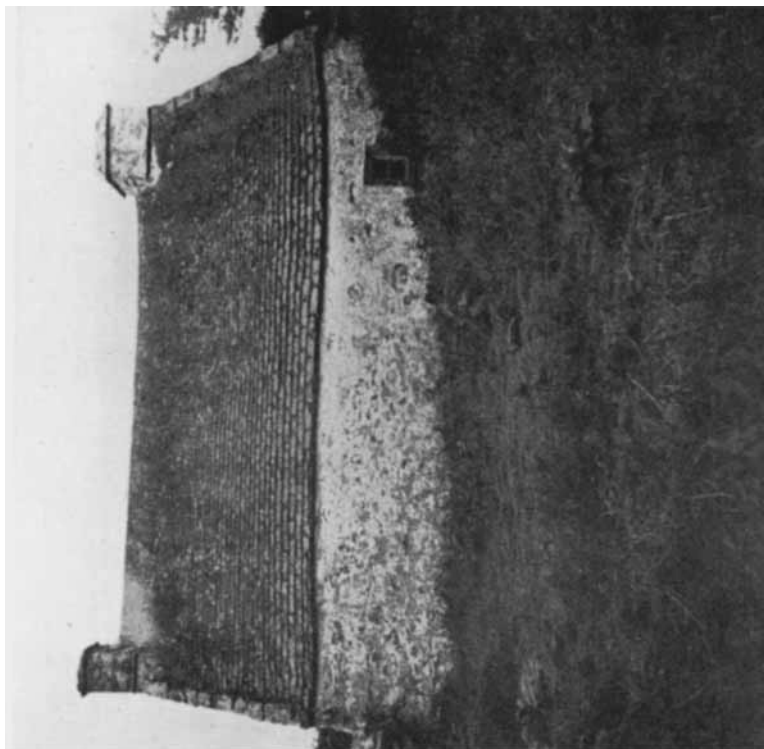


FIG. 9. LLAIN-WEN-ISAF : exterior, back (see pp. 428, 430-5)

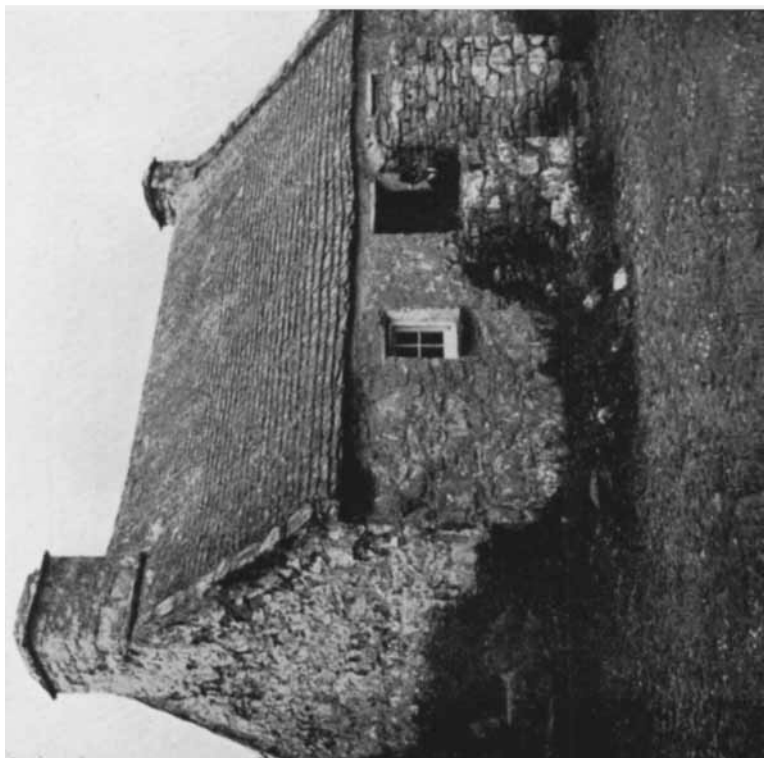


FIG. 8. LLAIN-WEN-ISAF : exterior, front (see pp. 428, 431, 435)
(see also FIGS. 2-4)

PLATE III



FIG. 10. CWM-GIÂR : fireplace (see pp. 428, 433)

PLATE IV

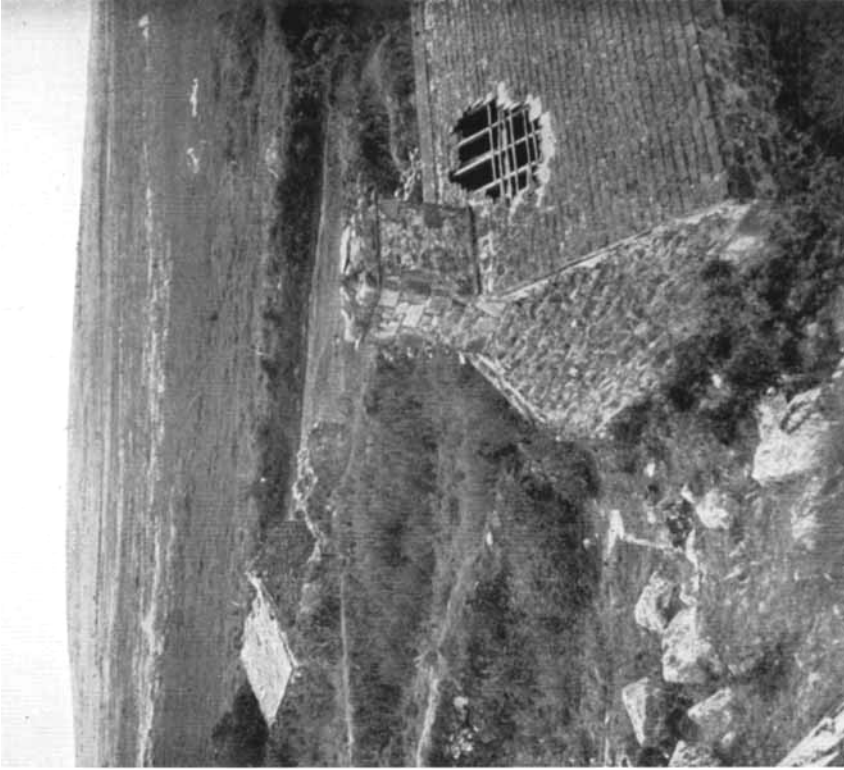


FIG. 12. CARN-DEIFOG-FACH : on the edge of the moor (*see* p. 438)

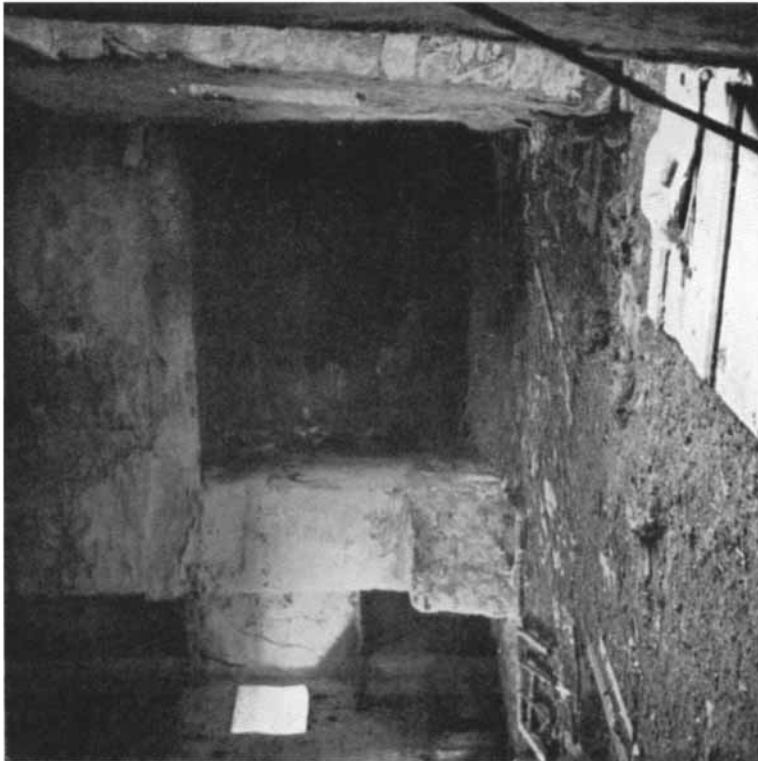


FIG. 11. CARN-DEIFOG-FACH : E. house, interior, living-room end (*see* pp. 428, 430, 433)

PLATE V



FIG. 13. FFYNNON-GOY-ISAF: sleeping loft, over bedroom (*see* p. 434)

PLATE VI



FIG. 15. CARN-DEIFOG-ISAF : roof (see pp. 434, 435)



FIG. 14. BLAEN-WAUN : cottage with one fireplace (see pp. 434, 435)

PLATE VII



FIG. 17. CARN-DEIFOG-ISAF: the yard (*see pp. 435, 437*)

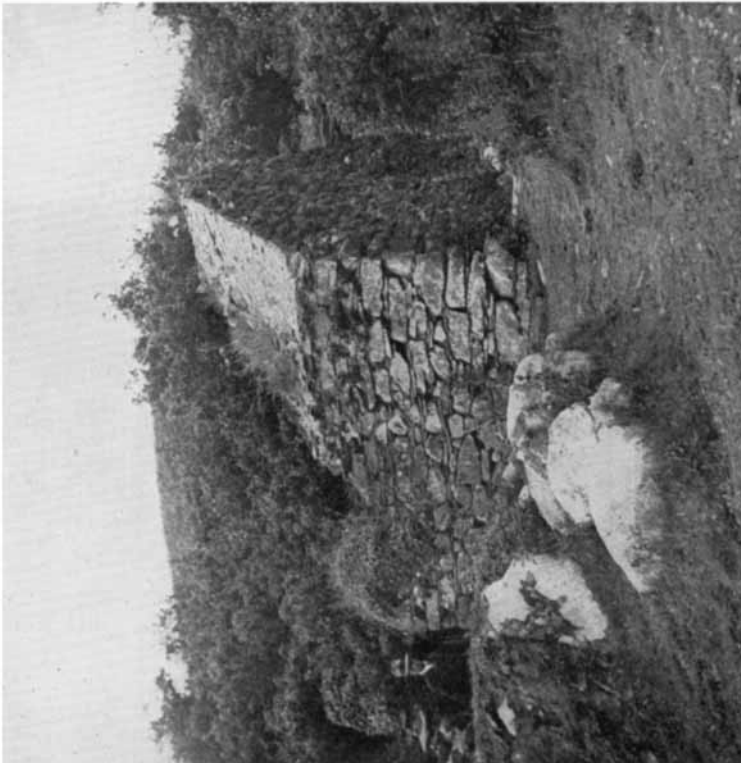


FIG. 16. CWM-CEILIOG: hearth gable (*see p. 435*)

PLATE VIII



FIG. 19. THE CROFTER GOES GARDENING (see p. 437)

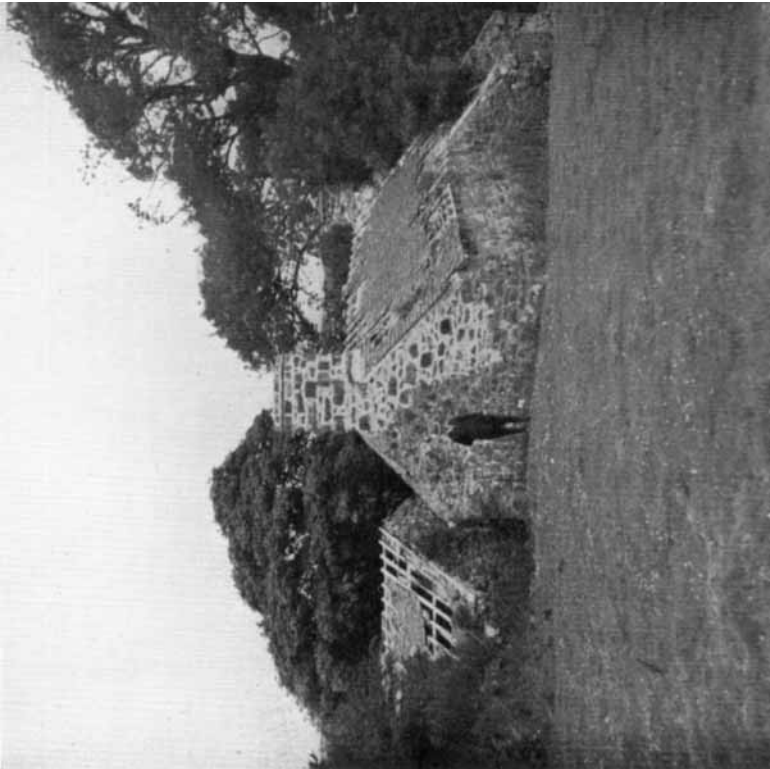


FIG. 18. CARN-DEIFOĞ-ISAF : the steading from the south (see p. 437)
(see also FIG. 5)