# SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES IN
# WELSH VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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The detailed information concerning vernacular architecture in Wales which has been assembled in the past twenty years suggests that there were few, if any, cultural links in this sphere between the two sides of the Irish Sea in recent times. True, Wales like Ireland had its Georgian country houses but in neither country was this an indigenous phenomenon; and at the opposite end of the social scale the occasional similarities in cottage architecture may be attributed to similar environmental factors rather than cultural diffusion. It is to the intermediate social categories that the bulk of our vernacular architecture material relates, however, and here the contrast between Wales and Ireland is most marked. Mr. Peter Smith has drawn attention to the very small number of primarily defensive tower houses of the late medieval period which exist in Wales, compared with the 400 in Co. Limerick alone. The implications of this difference are clear: from the sixteenth century on, social conditions in Wales favoured the emergence of a distinctive vernacular architecture. The consolidation of the scattered medieval holdings, with their girdles of small homesteads, into substantial farms provided a territorial basis for the construction first of the single-storey 'hall-houses' and later of the distinctively regional types of houses which still survive in such large numbers in the countryside. Rural affluence in this period supplied the economic facility, and the status-consciousness of the considerable element in the population which had at the least a genealogical background of gentility, provided the motivation. It was with England, rather than Ireland, that Wales shared the experience of the 'great re-building' of the period 1560-1640.

The architectural characteristics of the 'regional house' and the 'hall-house' which largely preceded it, have been discussed in detail in a number of publications.[1] It is intended here to discuss only certain social factors relating to the vernacular architecture mainly of the seventeenth century and later, and to indicate certain problems and topics calling for detailed investigation by the sociological historian. As yet, little effort has been made to synthesize the 'new' sociological history (or history of social structure) concerned mainly with pre-industrial times, with the surviving architectural evidence.

An interesting aspect of the regional pattern which developed in north-west Wales in the seventeenth century was the so-called 'unit system', a term used to describe the existence of two or more houses, each a complete unit in itself and of approximately the same status and date, built in close proximity to each other, sometimes sharing the same yard. The classical examples are Parc and Plasnewydd, Llanfrothen (Merioneth), both built by members of the Anwyl family (*Plates* XIV, XV); but several other instances have since been recorded, although little is known about the family arrangements involved in a residential grouping of this kind which apparently emphasised the separateness of the component units.[2] At Pen-y-bedw, Penmachno (Caernarvonshire), it is known that the builder of the second seventeenth-century house was a son marrying a rich wife, the father continuing to occupy the earlier

dwelling. Later, at least, the two houses at Pen-y-bedw served two separate farms, and direct internal access between the dwellings was a recent development.[3] Little is known of the significance of the unit system and its correlation with land tenure. Nineteenth-century evidence for *byw cyd*, i.e. the running of two farms belonging to members of the same family as a single working unit, recorded in south Caernarvonshire, suggests a variant form which does not necessarily imply the existence of a 'unit system', just as the latter need not
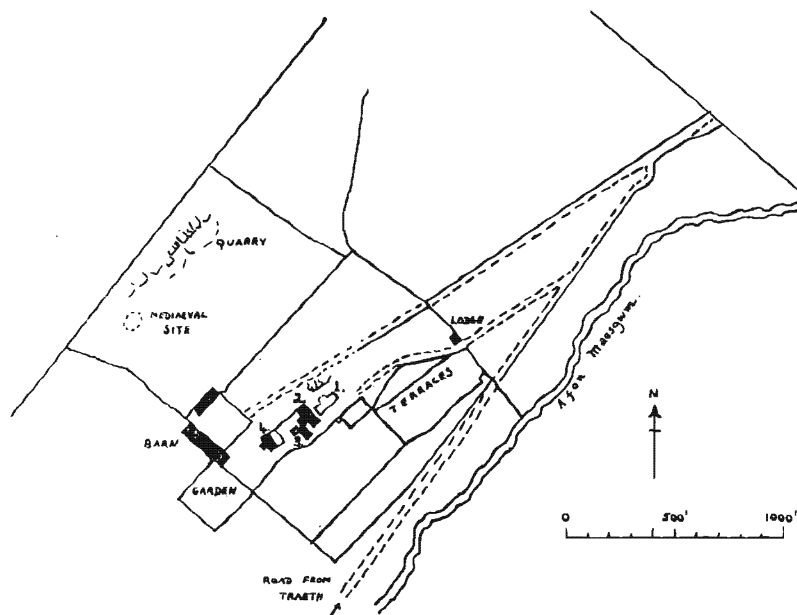


FIG. 25. Plan of Parc Llanfrothen, Merioneth
*(by courtesy of the Cambrian Archaeological Association)*

pre-suppose the joint occupation and operation of a farm. Contemporary evidence from Merioneth shows that farmhouses facing each other across the same farm yard were deliberately altered as a policy in estate management, either to bring about consolidation or to create two separate farm yards.[4] Seventeenth-century hearth-tax lists for one parish, Llanuwchllyn (Merioneth) on the estate in question, point to the possible multiple occupation of farmhouses lower down the social scale than the surviving examples of the unit system, but the interpretation of the evidence is by no means straightforward. It is clear, however, that the unit system, being essentially a grouping of separate households, would not be apparent from contemporary census enumerations and lists. Seen in its historical context, it appears to be quite distinct from survivals of the medieval pattern in other parts of Wales (e.g. Tredomen, Llanfilo, Breconshire), being, rather, a development which took place on the consolidated holding rather than a form of retarded consolidation. Whether

or not the unit system was linked to the population growth of the period 1550-1670, which was especially marked in those countries where this arrangement prevailed, is not clear;[5] certainly the population expansion of a later period in the same counties resulted in the multiple occupation of houses in both town and country as is suggested by nineteenth-century evidence.

The problem of the unit system illustrates the importance of the relationship between the vernacular architecture and the contemporary social structure. In lowland Monmouthshire Fox and Raglan noted the existence of as many as 144 farmhouses of the late sixteenth-century regional style in a tract 20 miles by 14 miles in area, a remarkable transformation of the countryside which was closely connected with agricultural prosperity based on the rising price of corn.[6] More difficult to account for is the high proportion of gentry houses in such unpromising areas as the upland parish of Penmachno (Caernarvonshire) where prosperity based on the cultivation of corn can hardly be offered as an explanation. Indeed the Wynn (Gwydir) papers make it clear that cattle-rearing was the basis of the economy of the Conway valley and its hinterland, but it is not at all clear that income from this source increased on a scale similar to that derived from the sale of corn.[7] Nevertheless Penmachno parish contains as many as a dozen houses of this period and it is tempting to look beyond regional differences in economy to account for such phenomena. What has yet to be investigated is the precise relationship between local social structures and the character of contemporary housing. In a society in which nuances of social rank were disproportionately important—as witness the elaborately formal precedence at the funerals of leading Welsh families arranged by heraldic authorities, and the numerous pew disputes in the parish churches where no herald supervised the order—can we be sure that we are able to detect all the architectural characteristics and amenities which served to identify a person's position in the imperceptibly graded social hierarchy? The visible trappings of gentility and of the gentleman's life-style are most readily apparent in their most extreme forms—in the possession of an ornate formal garden and its appurtenances,[8] or a gatehouse,[9] as well as in the detail of architectural and heraldic decoration. Among the lesser gentry and those whose antecedents (especially their pedigree and upbringing) entitled them to expect to adopt the style of life of a gentleman in seventeenth-century Wales, can we use the possession of some of the architectural features of the run-of-the-mill 'regional house' as an index of social grading? Perhaps there is more significance in the variations between different examples of the *same* 'regional type' than in the geographical variations of regional types. Only the bringing together of the data of sociological history and of vernacular architecture in the course of detailed local studies is likely to throw light on such matters.

Wales in fortunate in having among the replies to Edward Lhuyd's 'Parochial Queries' a source of information on the social grading of many parishes in the seventeenth century as seen by local respondents and linked by them with the houses men occupied.[10] One example will suffice to show the kind of material available and also to give some indication of the possible results which may be anticipated from a more detailed study carried out on these lines. The reply to Lhuyd's 'Queries' received from Llanuwchllyn (Merioneth) distinguishes, as do other replies, between the major categories of houses and may be summarised as follows, together with information taken from the 1662 Hearth Tax list.[11] The *tai kyvrivol* ('houses of account') number eight (with 10, 8, 4, 4, 3, 6, 1 and 2 hearths each, respectively, in the order given by Lhuyd). Some of these were in the hands of the Vaughan (Glan-llyn) estate which already had a rental of £224 in Merioneth, £114 of which was received from

19 tenants in Llanuwchllyn. Next came the 'other houses', seven in number, of which the owners of the first six are described as *uchelwyr* (gentlemen). Five of these had but a single hearth, there being no information about the sixth. The seventh, who was not an *uchelwr* had two hearths, but the 1662 list specifies Cadwaladr Robert *and his tenant*, possibly another example of multiple occupation. The distinction between the 'house of account' and the 'other houses' would appear to be related not to the descent of their owners (who were nearly all gentlemen) but to their affluence—their ability or inability to build houses befitting the status to which they aspired. Thomas Richard of Pantyceubren who headed the list of 'other houses' built his house in the regional style in 1684, and although described by Lhuyd as an *uchelwr*, is referred to as a yeoman in the inventory drawn up after his death in 1685; subjectively no doubt he counted himself a gentleman, but the probate value of his property (£45 16s. 0d.) places him in more objective terms on a similar level to Thomas Robert Lewis of Coedladur (£56) and John Cadwaladr, of Blaen-lliw (£33) both of whom were tenant farmers. The 'tenants' houses', in fact, form a third category numbering 15, of which 9 are named in the Hearth-tax list, all but one having a single hearth. Lhuyd's list names in all 30 houses in these three main categories; from the Hearth-tax list we know there were 107 other houses on which the tax was levied, with the possible addition of an unspecified number of houses the occupiers of which were exempted from payment on grounds of poverty.

The interpretation of data of this kind is notoriously difficult. Fox and Raglan have questioned Clapham's view that the single-hearth dwellings of the Hearth-tax list are connected with the agrarian proletariat, outservants, cottagers and paupers.[12] Clearly, on the evidence cited above, both tenants and the 'decaying' gentry in the Welsh social situation are also to be included alongside these other groups. In Llanuwchllyn at least—and it remains to be seen how typical this parish was of seventeenth-century Wales—the significant line separating the gentry proper from the aspiring or decaying lesser gentry (as well as lower social grades) is, in terms of vernacular architecture, the line separating those houses which had two or more hearths from those which only had one. It is reasonable to suggest that there was a qualitative difference between the styles of life possible in a single-hearth house and in a house with two or more hearths, and that this, in a community like Llanuwchllyn, set apart the gentry from the rest of the community. Having a second hearth (like having a second car in the twentieth century) implies a different pattern of life. Greater specialisation and separation of the functions of rooms, above all the privacy of a heated parlour compatible with both increased social distance from the servants and also the practices of hospitality and leisure befitting a gentleman, are implied by the existence of two (or more) hearths. Whether or not in each district the distinction between single and multi-hearth homes corresponds, as in Llanuwchllyn, with that between the lower orders and the gentry proper, it would appear that a significant qualitative difference in living conditions is involved. This may also provide a quantitative index if the relevant data are assembled on a regional basis. For example, using the published Hearth-tax lists for Pembrokeshire, it is possible to construct the following rough model of seventeenth-century society in the county:[13]

*Categories of Households, Pembrokeshire* 1670

| (a) | | | (b) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Paupers' houses ..... | 2873 | 46.8% | Single-hearth houses | 4934 | 80.5% |
| Other houses ..... | 3354 | 52.4% | Two-hearth houses ..... | 732 | 12.0% |
| | | | Houses with three or more hearths ..... ..... | 461 | 7.5% |

19.5%

Total households (excluding Haverfordwest) — 6127.

A further topic of sociological interest is the accommodation of servants in the seventeenth century and later. There are indications that some, at least, of the servants were related to their gentry employers or drawn from a similar social background,[14] and within the gentleman's household a hierarchial grading of servants existed. How numerous the servants were is not easy to determine in many instances. The two households at Gwydir (Llanrwst) contained 21 and 8 persons respectively in 1627 and the comparable household of the Bulkeleys of Baron Hill (Beaumaris) consisted of 27 servants in 1700, though it is uncertain how may were accommodated in the house itself. In Bodewryd, north Anglesey, at least 17 servants resided in and around the house and, according to a 1741 inventory, almost an entire storey seems to have been set aside as sleeping quarters for the maid-servants, the men-servants being housed in a kind of barracks in the rear courtyard among the secondary buildings of a country house of this standing, described as 'the hinds' or ploughservants' room in the court with a room over it'.[15]

It is, of course, to this arrangement for the outside accommodation of farm servants that the rural tradition of the *llofft stabl* (stable loft) belongs, a tradition which persisted longest in the north-western and south-western counties of Wales. An early eighteenth-century example at Caerau, Llanfairynghornwy (Anglesey), consists of a barn and stable with an upper floor entered from an external stone stair-case and lighted by dormer windows.[16] The only heating in the loft housing the unmarried menservants in accommodation of this kind came from the warmth rising from the bodies of the horses in the stable below. There is plenty of nineteenth century evidence of this practice but it is difficult to tell how ancient this tradition is, especially as the horse only took over from the ox as a draught animal within the last two hundred years or so. Dr. Joseph Downes describes in 1836 how on a particular farm 'the women retired to rest not in the house but according to common usage, even at this day, with the farm servants in retired pastoral districts, in summer at least, to a night's rest in the straw of the cow-house, all the older farmhouse accommodating their cattle under the same roof with the family, only divided by a wall of rough stones'. Also 'a large space is devoted to housing the cattle and one of the narrow divisions formed by strong old posts and rails, where the litter and hay is kept, forms the chamber for these bed-fellows of the kine'.[17] This is reminiscent of a practice referred to by the fifteenth-century poet Llawdden in a poem to Watcyn Fychan of Hergest (Herefordshire): 'my place at night shall be the floor nearest the byre of my house where ploughman and oxherd bed down like bears alongside the cattle stall'.[18] The tradition of the *llofft stabl* which apparently derived from this earlier primitive arrangement was by no means uniform. Sir D. Lleufer Thomas, referring to Merioneth states that 'along the sea coast from Harlech to Llwyngwril most of the men servants sleep either above the stable or in a part of the dwelling house which has an entrance from outside. In the rest of Dolgelley Union they sleep indoors'.[19]

It was the critical question of separate and independent access, according to nineteenth-century observers, which restricted the farmer's control over the nocturnal wanderings of his servants and which lay behind the vexed problem of sexual immorality. In other counties such as Breconshire, despite careful investigation, no trace has been discovered of the outdoor housing of menservants, and a second staircase was usually found in those farm-houses where the servants lived in. The implications of these regional differences in the accommodation of farm servants are difficult to assess in terms of the possible social distance which existed between master and servant, and much work needs to be done on the pattern of rural labour in the last century (and earlier) in respect of social and geographical mobility as well as in the provision of housing.[20]

Closely linked to the subject of the accommodation of servants is that of the rural cottage. There seems little reason to doubt the received view that the housing of the submerged 'agrarian proletariat' underwent a revolution during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What a person officially regarded as a pauper in terms of seventeenth-century poverty could hope to achieve by way of providing himself with adequate accommodation cannot have been very substantial. The houses of turf hastily erected overnight on encroach-ments upon common land represent a strand in this lowly tradition. Some light on this practice is provided by Thomas Edwards (*Twm o'r Nant*) in a poem written about 1780 on behalf of a poor man seeking assistance from his neighbours to build a house on the mountain near Llanuwchllyn (Merioneth). Ffowc Sion, a poor mole-catcher, we are told, is aged and infirm and wishes to build and enclose a small plot. He asks everyone to give what he can—wood, and money in particular. The carpenter, slater and blacksmith, he hopes, will not forget him; he will be glad of their labour for a day or two.[21] It is important to remember that the house of turf was merely a temporary arrangement put together by the concerted effort of from 30 to 40 neighbours so as to establish the builder's ownership in the eyes of country people, if not of the law. Building a *ty unnos* always took place as early as possible in summer so that a second, more permanent, dwelling could be erected before autumn, the original turf building being then converted into a cowshed. The cost of building houses of this type was low, especially if the assistance of neighbours was forth-coming. Lewis Morris estimated in 1730 that a 'boghouse' with clay walls and a thatched roof cost £1 12s. 0d. including labour. Arthur Young later in the century estimated that a Pembrokeshire mud-walled cottage could be built for £10.[22] Even in the nineteenth century rural housing was not unduly expensive. Hafodyrhaidd, Llanuwchllyn (*Plate* XVI), was built by a tenant at his own expense about 1886 for £73 and follows the regional style of an earlier era. In Anglesey about the same time it was calculated that a four-roomed cottage at Aberffraw coast about £65 to build. Nineteenth-century cottages, however, are seldom architectural masterpieces, however much they excelled on the buildings which they replaced. They are more significant as a social phenomenon than as an aspect of vernacular architecture: it is the density of their distribution rather than their lay-out or constructional forms which is likely to prove rewarding as a field of study. Often they were the accompaniment of nineteenth-century enclosure (*Plate* XVI) and were built from the most readily available material, usually clay or untrimmed glacial boulders.

During the period when most of the cottages existing at the present day were being built, the social structure consisting of a graduated scale of status groups of which the 'great re-building' of an earlier age had been a manifestation, had given way almost entirely to a rural society organised in terms of opposing social classes. The polarisation of Welsh

society into landlord and tenant which was so significant in political and religious history was not without its effects on the vernacular architecture of the countryside. Side by side with the earlier gentry houses now occupied by tenants there emerged an uninteresting estate achitecture, the only merit of which was its vast superiority over the lowly buildings which it superseded. The dramatic transformation of the cultural landscape in the last century was achieved not only in the sphere of housing but also in terms of agricultural building especially before the agricultural depression which began in the 1870's. As regards sheer scale this later period surely deserves to be called 'the great re-building' just as much as the classical period 1560-1640 to which the description was first given. Qualitatively, however, the two ages of 'great re-building' were quite different; the rebuilding of the earlier period was undertaken for their own occupation by gentlemen of varying degrees in a status-orientated, locally-based society; that of the nineteenth century occurred in a polarised society in which the landlord was as much concerned with the outbuildings as with the farmhouse itself—which in any case he was not going to occupy. The first period gave us the variations of regional style and social gradation, the second the more uniform characteristics of estate building seen increasingly as a business enterprise and an investment. Each, in its own way, constituted a revolution, each, too, is worthy of study in an attempt to understand the past which still survives around us.

## REFERENCES

[1] C. Fox and Raglan, *Monmouthshire Houses*, 3 vols., 1951-54; P. Smith, 'Rural housing in Wales', in J. Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, 1500-1640, 1966; P. Smith and C. E. V. Owen, 'Traditional and Renaissance Elements in some Late Stuart and Early Georgian Half-timbered Houses in Arwystli', *Mont. Coll.*, LV, 1958; S. R. Jones and J. T. Smith 'The House of Breconshire', *Brycheiniog*, IX, 1963 (and subsequent volumes); also the *Caernarvonshire Inventory* (3 vols.) and *Anglesey Inventory* of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments.

[2] W. J. Hemp and C. Gresham, 'Park, Llanfrothen and the Unit System', *Arch. Camb.*, XCVIII (1943), 98-112.

[3] R.C.A.M. *Caerns.* I, No. 622.

[4] *Royal Commission on Land in Wales*, 1895, Min. of Evidence, I, p.332.

[5] It is estimated that whereas the population of Wales as a whole increased by 52% between 1550 and 1670, that of Caernarvonshire increased by 76% and Merioneth by 85%. L. Owen, 'The Population of Wales in the 16th and 17th centuries', *THSC*, 1959, 99-113.

[6] Fox and Raglan, *op. cit.*, II, 15.

[7] F. Emery, 'The Farming Regions of Wales', in J. Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV: 1500-1640.

[8] Ff. G. Payne, 'Yr Hen Ardd Gymreig', *Lleufer*, XI, 1955, 55-66.

[9] It has been suggested that the Wynns' town house, Plas-Mawr, Conway, with its gatehouse dated 1595 set the standard for other leading north Wales families, including the rival house of Cefnamwlch in Llŷn. The fashion for crow-stepped gables in north Wales may also have had the same origin. R.C.A.M., *Caerns.*, III, clxii.

[10] F. Emery, 'A Map of Edward Lhuyd's "Parochial Queries . . ." of Wales (1696)', *THSC*, 1958, 41-53.

[11] *Arch. Camb.*, 1910, supplt., 70-74; *JMHRS*, II, 1953.

[12] Fox and Raglan, *op. cit.*, III, 120.

[13] *TWWHS*, IX-XI, 1920-26.

[14] *cf.* G. Nesta Evans, *Social Life in Mid-eighteenth Century Anglesey*, 1936.

[15] *Cal. Wynn Papers*, No. 185; F. Jones, *TAAS*, 1940.

[16] R.C.A.M. *Anglesey*, 76.

[17] J. Downes, *The Mountain Decameron*, 1836, I, 84, 165-6.

[18] I am indebted to Mr. Ff. G. Payne for this reference.

[19] *Royal Commission on the Agricultural Labourer in Wales*, 1894.

[20] *cf.* S. Thomas, 'The Agricultural Labour Force in some south-west Carmarthenshire Parishes in the mid-nineteenth century', *WHR*, III, 1966, 63-73.

[21] T. Edwards, *Gardd o Gerddi*, 1826 ed., 140.

[22] An interesting glimpse of the cost and other considerations involved in building operations in an earlier period is given in *The Diaries and Letters of Phillip Henry* (ed. M. H. Lee, 1882) relating to Worthenbury, Flintshire in 1693; 'I am more and more for son Tylst pulling the old house down, rather $y_n$ repayring it, a new wil bee cheaper than he thinks & I am sure much more inviting to a Tenant esp. for warmth upon that wet & cold bank, 'twil need no repayring, a little wil fit what wil bee needful while 'tis as is; the rest by degrees at leasure. 50, thous of brick 10 lb (=£), 4 cartload of lime, the workman tells mee today will lay $y_m$ which is 20s, besides $y_e$ carriage, 10 lb (=£) the workmanship which wil bee the wals. The old Timber wil most if it serve (the rest may bee sold) joysts, doores, Boards, $y_e$ carpenters' work about it cannot bee, for present 15 lb (=£) the covering not 15 more. A trusty man such as Randle Catheral, to oversee both pulling down and rearing could be had for a little, summering there or thereabouts. The building 10 yards square & 8 yds high, for 3 storeys besides $y_e$ Cellar, would be a mean' (p. 365).
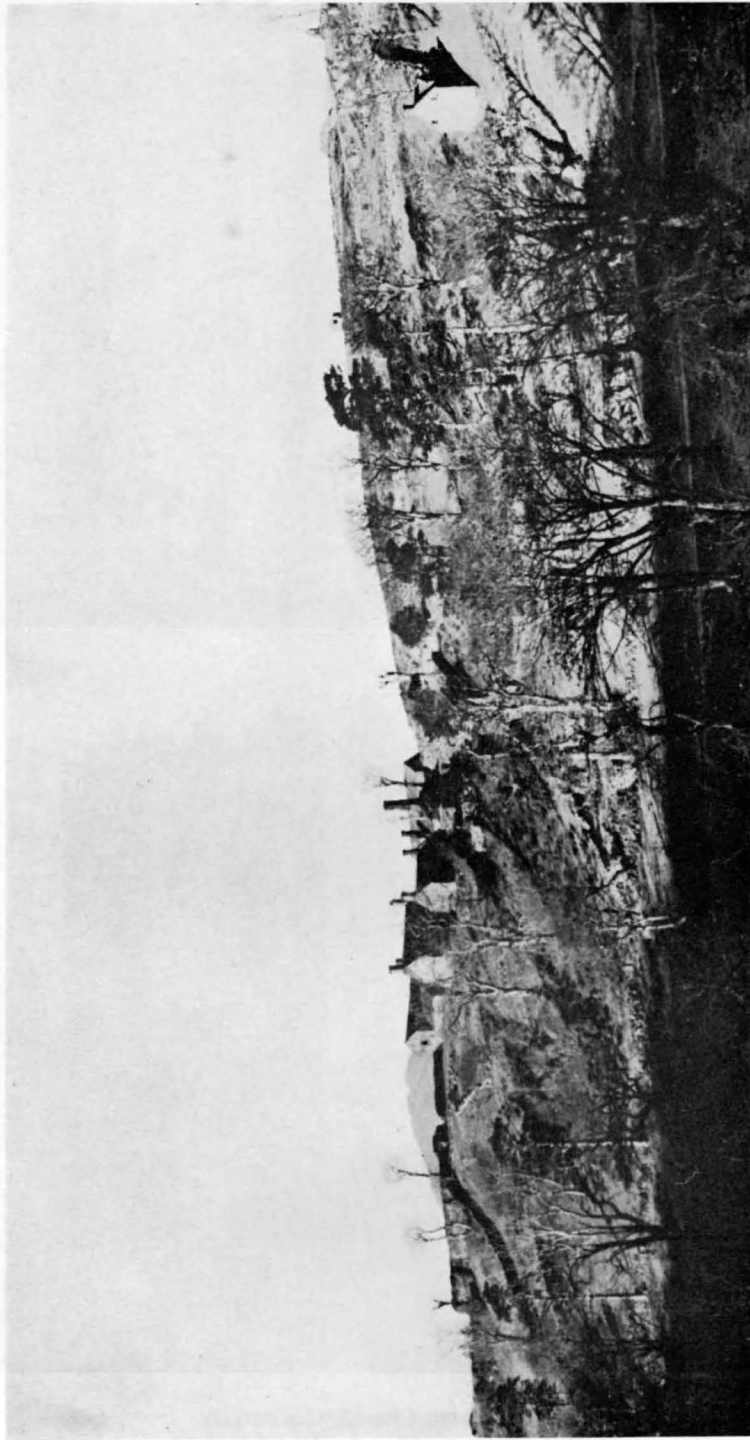
PLATE XIV  Parc Llanfrothen, Merioneth, general view
(*by courtesy of the Cambrian Archaeological Association*)

PLATE XV. (*a*) Parc Llanfrothen, House 2 from N.E.



PLATE XV. (*b*) Parc Llanfrothen, Houses 2 and 3 from W
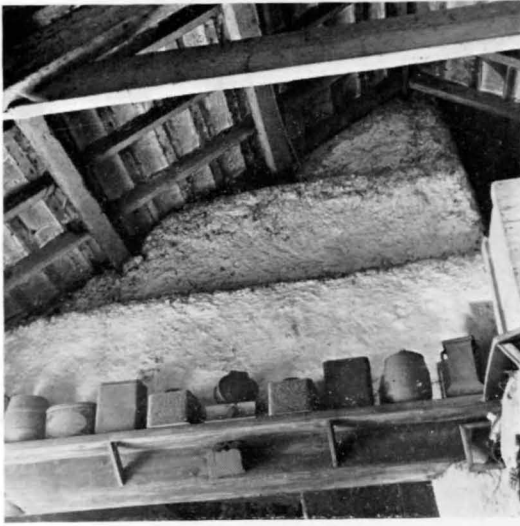(*by courtesy of the Cambrian Archaeological Association*)

PLATE XVI. (a) Ty'n Pwll, Rhoshirwaun, Llŷn peninsula, Caernarvonshire

(c) Hafod-yr-haidd, Llanuwchllyn, Merioneth

(d) Bryn-gro, Rhydlios, Caernarvonshire, 1965, showing turf wall

(b) Mownt, Aberdaron, Llŷn Peninsula, Caernarvonshire

(*photographs by courtesy of the Welsh Folk Museum*)