

COURT FARM, Pembrey

**Visited Summer 2010 at the suggestion of the
Friends of Court Farm: Ffrindiau'r Cwrt**

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COURT FARM, PEMBREY

Court Farm, Pembrey: provisional account

Court Farm, Pembrey, is one of the most significant unrestored multi-period mansions in Wales. It is a building of great complexity that needs to be clearly interpreted. Documentary evidence suggests that there has been a significant building on this site since the C14th/C15th when Pembrey manor or lordship was held by the Butler family. The earlier periods are archaeological. However several building phases survive which can be clearly identified and provide an architectural 'narrative' for the house.

Phase I. c. 1550+. A C16th manor-house with great hall.

The core of Court Farm is a ground-floor hall range with large lateral fireplace and a first-floor great chamber over the hall. The house belongs to a class of high-status great houses which retain the medieval 'three-unit' plan with high and low ends but are storeyed with a lateral chimney. The lateral fireplace appears in the last generation of medieval halls and first generation of storeyed houses. *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* illustrates a number of examples (fig. and Map 28). Court Farm is particularly notable for its great size and height; it is perhaps the greatest surviving house of this type. The moulding of the great fireplace suggests a mid-C16th date. The cusped roof timbers reported from the upper end chamber are consistent with this date.

Phase II. c. 1600. 'Modernization' and courtyard plan.

In this phase the house was replanned, and a courtyard created, separating the principal rooms from the service rooms. A service range (bakehouse, brewhouse etc) was built parallel to the house and linked to it by a new cross wing. This created a U-plan complex with an inner courtyard. The kitchen of the old house was transferred to the cross-wing and the old kitchen became a parlour with a principal wainscoted chamber above.

The replanned house was unified by distinctive late-Elizabethan architectural detail: sunk-chamfered windows and diagonally-set chimneys (cf. *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, Maps 36 & 54). The sunk or recessed chamfer was the characteristic high-status dressed-stone detail in south Wales in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The earliest dated examples occur in Glamorgan at Old Beaupre (1586) and in Monmouthshire at Alltybela (1599). It is reasonable to date this phase at Court Farm to c. 1600. There is an interesting contrast between the sunk-chamfered windows of the principal house and the service range. In the former they are of expensive dressed stone, but in the latter they are timber; both are contemporary and date from about 1600.

Phase III. c. 1600. Corbelled additions.

There are two structures which have caused considerable puzzlement at Court Farm: (1) The so-called 'porch' projection on the [] elevation of the house, which looks towards (2) the detached 'gatehouse'. Both structures are distinguished by stone corbelling. This carries forward the upper floor slightly but serves no real practical function. The corbelling must be regarded as decorative. Drawings of Old Cydweli show that corbelling was part of the local vernacular style; it seems to be a case of stone imitating timber jettying.

- (1) The porch was not historically a porch, although a gable-end window has been latterly enlarged as a doorway. The structure is distinctive. There are small lateral windows, odd internal corbelling, and the floor seems to have been inserted. It is proposed that the 'porch' is actually a much-altered stair projection. The plan of the C17th greater house demanded a great stair. The projection at Court Farm seems to have accommodated a grand well stair, such as has survived at (e.g.) Newton House.
- (2) The gatehouse was not historically a gateway and cannot historically have functioned as such because of the site topography. The structure is both corbelled and crenellated and was clearly meant to be an eye-catcher at the approach to the house. What was its function? There are several possibilities, but a survey is needed before a secure conclusion can be arrived at. However, the range is plausibly a stable. All great houses had impressive stables, and this storeyed range could have accommodated several laterally stalled horses.

Phase IV. c. 1700.

There is some evidence for additional modernisation *c.* 1700, when Court Farm was acquired by the Ashburnham Estate. An up-to-date parlour was created at the upper end of the hall from the old inner room. The room was given fashionable tall mullioned and high-transomed windows. It was wainscoted and a semi-circular scar in the wall shows that it incorporated a built-in 'buffet' or display cupboard.

Phase V. Partition c. 1800+.

In the early C19th Court Farm was partitioned. A stone wall was constructed at the lower end of the hall which divided the upper end of the house from the lower end of the house. This partition seems to have been designed to provide separate accommodation for the farm tenant and the officials (agent) of the Ashburnham estate when visiting Pembrey. Partition does not seem to have greatly altered the house, and Court Farm escaped thoroughgoing Victorianisation. However, at some point, the roof over the hall range was replaced, and dereliction set in during the later C20th.

Significance

Court Farm is significant:

1. Because of its historical associations.
2. Because it retains the plan of a 16th/C17th great house complete with the service-range and courtyard.
3. The archaeology of the surrounding area, including gardens and ancillary buildings, is potentially rich and remains to be fully explored.

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Owner: The Carmarthenshire Building Preservation Trust: Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf.

Plans: RCAHMW plans to be revised.

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