

FRIENDS OF COURT FARM, PEMBREY

Friends of Court Farm
Ffrindiau'r Curt



INFORMATION PREPARED

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Court Farm, Pembrey Carmarthenshire

Court Farm at Pembrey is one of Carmarthenshire's few remaining ancient manor houses. Court is named from the 'court leet' that would have been held there, under the supervision of the lord of the manor, dealing with rents and tenancy disputes.

The earliest document relating to Court is dated 1361, now in the National Library of Wales, stating that John le Boteler of Penbrey had borrowed money from Richard de Caunville, Prior of Kidwelly. It is thought he borrowed the money to pay for changes to Court – linking the two parts making a fine family home suitable for his status. It is not known if the debt was ever repaid! The le Botelers, or Butlers, were an Anglo-Norman family who were granted the Pembrey estate by the Lords of Kidwelly.

Six generations of Butlers, all with the first name of John, lived at Court until c1500, when a daughter married into the Vaughan family of Bredwardine, Herefordshire. Butler heraldry can be seen in the south window of St Illtyd's Church, Pembrey – two terracotta plaques depicting three covered cups.



The Butler Coat of Arms

The Vaughans prospered at Court for nearly two centuries, squires of an estate of 21,000 acres of woods, pasture and salt-marsh. Their most lucrative asset was the right of wreckage, entitling them to seize the cargoes of ships which had run aground on the treacherous Cefn Sidan sands. Walter Vaughan was appointed High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1557 and Court was rebuilt in its present form, a large Tudor mansion. Sir Richard Vaughan, backed the wrong side in the Civil War, and was fined for delinquency by Parliament. Bridget, the last of the Vaughans, married John Ashburnham of Sussex in 1677. The Ashburnhams were soon raised to the peerage as barons and later earls.

Court ceased to be an important mansion, as the Ashburnhams continued to reside in Sussex, having no need of a residence in remote Pembrey. Lord Ashburnham (as he had now become) visited his Welsh estates in 1687, and noted Court as 'an old house, large enough, and kept in pretty good repaire'.

So Court became the home of tenant farmers. This saved it from later rebuilding, so it survives as an unaltered example of a 16th century house.

Sited prominently on the hillside looking out to sea, Court became an important navigational aid to shipping in the Burry Estuary, featuring on several maps. Perhaps its most notorious resident in the 18th century was William Emmanuel, or Wil Manni, farm servant and footpad. He took to robbing passers-by on the mountain road from Pembrey to Trimsaran, but was eventually caught and hanged for his crimes, which included murder. Wil Manni's body was gibbeted just above Court, as a warning to others.

The Earls of Ashburnham continued to own the Pembrey estate until 1922, when it was sold to a Mr Butler [no known links to the original Butlers] who rented it to a family who resided there until 1948; in 1937 it was sold unexpectedly to the Bonnells, when the Thomas family moved in 1948 the building was then only wanted for storage and the land for farming; so Court buildings, unloved and unwanted, fell into disrepair and was finally abandoned in the 1960s.

Court Farm was first listed on the 3rd March 1966 as 'Court Farm and Outbuilding'. On the 25th November 2003 it was re-listed as part of Cadw's resurvey of the whole area. This time the house was listed as 'Court Farmhouse' and the barn was separately listed as 'Outbuilding on S side of Court Farm'. Recently approaches have been made to Cadw to have the buildings listed in a higher category and informally we have been told that it will be re-listed at least Grade 2*.

Historical Context

Court Farm, along with its intriguing castellated barn, is a large manor house which dates back to the mid sixteenth century, although it may incorporate an earlier medieval structure. Court is one of the earliest examples known examples of storied houses. It is particularly noted for its great size and height and is probably the most important building of this type in Wales. In the early 17th century additions were made including a kitchen; reroofing and refenestration took place and fine panelling was installed in a principal bedroom. Later in the 17th century a north wing, comprising of service quarters, was added.

In the 19th century some internal alterations were undertaken as the property was sub- divided in order to accommodate tenant farmers.

The so called barn, for that is how it was later used, is a most intriguing structure. It has corbelling and battlements; its entrance seems too small for use as a barn or gatehouse, but there is evidence that it could be part of a more extensive structure. An archaeological survey would be the only way to resolve the mysteries of this building



The Barn

For centuries Court Farm has stood as a local landmark and in an area largely devoid of medieval or Tudor buildings and remains a rare and important survivor, not just in the locality, but in the wider Carmarthenshire context.

The Architectural Legacy

Court Farm dates back to early in the reign of Elizabeth 1. As such it is the earliest surviving house in the area. Llanelly House is dated 1714, which is when it was rebuilt in the classical style, but an earlier house dates back to the mid 17th century, part of which still survives at the rear. Court is some 100 years older and the only other buildings surviving from this era are parts of Pembrey church and Kidwelly Castle.

A very recent brief inspection noted the following :-

- Some 10 stone mullioned windows (only one slightly damaged)
- 1 wooden mullioned window (copy of the above)
- The existence of possibly very early roof timbers
- Internal as well as external corbelling on the 'porch'
- A corbelled internal chimney
- In situ stone fireplaces.
- Substantial stone diagonal chimneys in generally good condition.

Since the decision of the HBAC in 1986 that Court Farm was of outstanding importance, and when an in principal decision was made to offer grant aid at the then maximum of 60%, there has been no change in architectural features of Court Farm.



A rare wooden mullioned window

Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

In the summer of 2010, the Friends of Court Farm contacted the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. They asked, in view of the potential developing project that the building be re assessed for its architectural history.

Following a series of visits by Richard Suggett, the Royal Commissions inspector of buildings at risk,

Mr Suggett's report concluded that:-

- 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.
- Court Farm is particularly notable for its great size and height; it is perhaps the greatest surviving house of this type

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.

The Structural Condition

As Court Farm has not been lived in since 1962, the inevitable ravages of time, weather, vandals and possibly thieves have all contributed to the present situation whereby nearly all the roofs and internal timbers have collapsed into the building.

It is a testament to the robustness of solid masonry construction that a structural engineer's report undertaken in 2003 was able to conclude that:

'the building retains a good proportion of its original load bearing walls and these remain generally stable. Some isolated areas of movement were noted to walls and the use of proprietary stitching anchors would be recommended as an appropriate technique. The building is capable of being stabilised and conserved in its existing configuration with only isolated areas of 'take down' or demolition prior to reinstatement of missing areas.'

The Potential Uses

Court Farm lies adjacent to the award winning Millennium Coastal Park and within close proximity to major venues such as Pembrey Country Park, the Welsh Motor Sports Centre and Ffos Las horse racing course. As such its future use can complement these facilities and those now being developed such as Llanelly House.

The proposal is to restore Court Farm by repairing its basic structure, using all available research, to its most recent phase, incorporating all known features from the various stages of its gradual evolution. This will leave a series of spaces for which the Feasibility Study undertaken in 2003 considered a range of options.

The site has adequate access and car parking, and enjoys splendid coastal views from the privacy of the walled garden.

The barn, once restored will be a state-of-the-art, multi functional venue that can be used for educational purposes. However it is recognised that buildings need to be flexible and can be adapted to meet the needs required both locally and nationally.

It is imperative that buildings are designed to have the potential to change, to meet the needs of the locality.

To support this function the main house can be reinstated, with supporting dining areas and rest areas downstairs, catering facilities; bedrooms for those requiring overnight accommodation.

To ensure that the buildings are financially viable, the venue can be utilised for functions other than educational.

It is hoped to reinstate, authentically the Jacobean oak panelling room to its former glory using the photographs held by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales



Court Farm Jacobean panelled room

Garden Project

Early in 2010, Elisabeth Whittle, Inspector of Historic Parks and Gardens, Cadw, visited the garden remains at Court Farm and concluded that:

‘The physical remains of compartments and terracing around the house suggest that some, or all of the area played a role, in part at least, as an ornamental garden.’

In view of this, the Friends wish to explore the possibility of re-creating a Tudor garden in the walled area of the property. The orchard is not owned by the Trust.

The Trust has given its approval to this idea

It is not intended to be the ‘Kenilworth of Carmarthenshire’ but a project they can reasonably fund and find funding to assist them with their endeavour.

However, they need advice and guidance in these matters from appropriate, knowledgeable and experienced bodies in order to take the project forward and answer the questions

Talks have begun with the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust who have indicated they are intrigued by the project and that there will be collaboration to restore the garden to its Tudor origins, providing an educational and attractive resource.

Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf.

In 2003 Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf, the Carmarthenshire Historic Building Preservation Trust, commissioned a study from a leading Welsh Conservation Architect to undertake a detailed feasibility study of Court Farm. This report looked at a number of possible future uses for the buildings ranging from its return to a single domestic dwelling to that of a restaurant or self catering holiday apartments.

Most importantly a full structural survey was undertaken which revealed that despite the obvious loss of the roofs and internal floors, the main structures are in a reasonable condition requiring stabilisation and repairs.

On the 29th January 2010, the owners handed over the keys of ownership to the Trust and at last the long process of restoring Court Farm can begin.

The first step is the offer of grant from Cadw of £40,000 towards initial stabilisation works. This will have to match funded by at least £60,000 before the task of raising the full £2m+ to complete the restoration can even begin. Initial talks have already been undertaken with the Heritage Lottery Fund as a principal funder for the project.

The outlook for Court is optimistic; currently the building is fenced off from the general public, this is to ensure their safety. Although the structure is sound, debris from the overhanging ivy could

bring down some pieces of stone or wood. Work is currently being carried out in preparation for surveys and to rid the grounds of 40 years of debris.

The good news is that people interested in viewing the building can visit; we are holding a series of tours. The tours last about an hour and a half and can be arranged by contacting the secretary

The Friends of Court Farm

The Trust is particularly fortunate to be in the unique position of having a community based group to back them up in and to work in very close partnership with.

The Friends of Court Farm were formed in 2006 and have since played a huge part in the acquisition of Court Farm.

Court Farm was featured in the 2006 BBC's Restoration Village programme. The Friends were disappointed not to have won the Welsh heat but vowed to maintain its profile.

True to their word, the friends have maintained that high profile. They continue to hold numerous community events and have forged and maintained communications with many relevant bodies. They have worked continuously in a supporting role.

Within the local community the Friends have been continually active, for example local schools participate in the annual Art Competition. The Art Competition is usually held in local churches and chapels, all local schools are invited to participate. The exhibition usually runs over two days, teachers, parents and children are all welcomed to participate in afternoon tea and cakes.

Local groups, such as the historical societies, U3A and WEA are invited for a guided tour of Court Farm followed by home cooked lunch or afternoon tea. These tours are extremely interesting ; two experts on the building and its history take the group around the grounds and into the building its self and the architecture explained, family history and the house history told.

For groups unable to 'take the TOUR', a small contingent go to the group at their meeting places do a complete presentation.

School children are also encouraged via the school curriculum to learn about their local heritage; they have participated in concerts for Court and have acted out their own pageant depicting the history of Court Farm. They relished in the story of Will Manni – who was hung and gibbeted by the Court.

As part of a Welsh Assembly Government initiative, RAISE- (*Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education; a 14million pound initiative that has run since 2006*) the Friends have been in partnership with the local school and educational authority and have filmed a series of monologues about some of the characters who have lived at Court Farm over the centuries. This involved the script writing, costume design and making, production and the subsequent filming in locations within the county. This film is now available to all schools in the area

The Friends have participated in the Civic Trust for Wales [in conjunction with Cadw] Open Doors Scheme recently, with visitor numbers exceeding what was expected.

The friends have also participated in the Llanelli festival, have visited many locations within the county to spread the word to visitors at those places that include the National Botanical Garden of Wales , Llandeilo's Newton House at Dinefwr , Kidwelly Castle and Llanelli's St Elli Centre; at all places we have been made extremely welcome. The friends have an impressive display set for people to look at, giving them a small insight to the building, its history and the architecture. Experts are always on hand to talk to the visitors.

The Friends have over the past few years been very vocal about the importance of this building and its significance to the county. They have lobbied local MP's, Assembly members; all who have helped to bring the building to the notice of those persons with the appropriate influence.

It was the Friends who petitioned the Historic Buildings Advisory Council for Wales and Cadw to re think their decision not to grant any aid to Court Farm in November 2009. They felt very strongly that this decision had been made with insufficient information and they lobbied the group encouraging them to visit and see for themselves the magnificent building that would be condemned to decline if not restored.

The HBAC visited in January 2010, the same day that the then owners transferred ownership to the Trust. The eminent group that visited were truly amazed and inspired by the building. They subsequently advised Cadw accordingly and Cadw reviewed their findings and declared that Court Farm was of outstanding importance.

The friends are committed to the restoration of this building and its future.

CONTACTS

Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf. and Friends of Court Farm Committee

Carmarthenshire Building Preservation Trust

Chairman: Nigel Bowen-Morris

Trustees:

Mrs M Courteen

Mrs K Bown

Mr D Priest

Dr G Stevenson

Secretary : Mrs P Neil

Committee, Friends of Court Farm

D Conway, BA. hons

Chairman,

D Neil, Art & Design, Glasgow, Vice-Chairman

J.L. Williams Accountant

P.J. Neil; Secretary [also secretary to Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf.]

S Isaacs, architect

M.S. Davies

J .Heward Rees

E.J. Williams

J Davies

D Priest [dual role], BA; MRTPI [Ret] IHBC; Board Member Civic Trust for Wales; Trustee Cadw Sir Gaerfyrddin Cyf.

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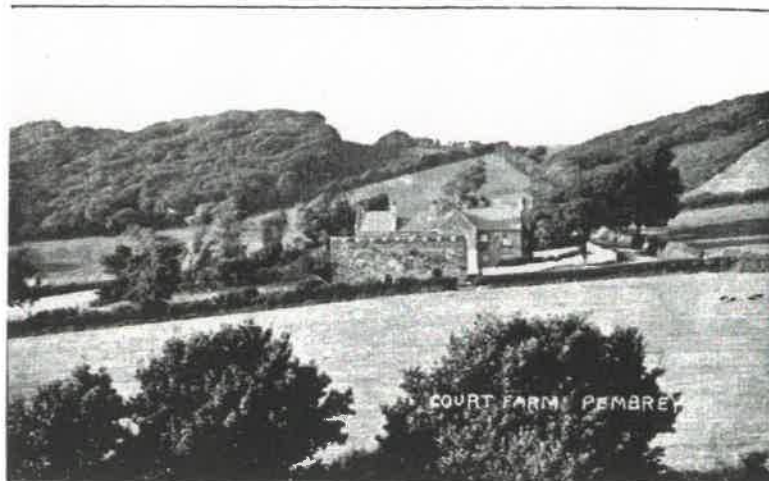
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Court Farm in total isolation c.1904.



*COURT FARM, PEMBREY
TAKEN BY ROY WYNNAN'S DATA CIRCA 1960*



Court farm circa 1960

