

Hafod - The Oldest House in Wales ?

Little is known about the early history of Hafod, but it has been confirmed, by a leading Welsh archaeologist, Neil Johnstone, to incorporate a medieval house. Dating timbers may only take us back to the time of the first additions to the original house. That was built as a hall house with a tower, which now contains the private lounge and room 2. The tower was of a very particular native welsh style, of the 13th century, containing a cellar, with a chamber over, the roof of which was concealed by a very high parapet wall. The outstanding example of such a tower is Dolwyddelan Castle, although the keep is now taller than when it was first built.

Hafod's hall is now sub-divided into the bar and kitchen and was joined to the tower by what is now the resident's lounge.

The pattern is unique, being found in no other surviving house. The clue to Hafod's age lies in the tower. Following the conquest of Edward 1, a Royal Licence would have been needed to build a tower and Hafod is simply too plain a building to have been the home of someone influential enough to obtain such a licence. That suggests a date prior to Edward 1's conquest. At that time Trefriw was the centre of the royal lands of Glan Conwy and Llewellyn The Great, de facto Prince of Wales, had a house [called a llys] there. Indeed it was reputed to be his favourite, due to the excellent hunting, in the area.

We know, from the remains of his house in Conwy, that at least some of Llewellyn's houses had towers. Was Hafod built for one of Llewellyn's officials, copying the style of the Prince's house, but on a smaller scale? To be allowed to do so would send out a strong signal of the status of the occupier, while the stability of his reign would have permitted the building of a stone house, rather than timber, which was the norm. It is significant that skilled stone masons were at a premium and a number of castles were even built with a stone keep or towers and dry stone walls, for the rest

A further, possible clue is that Trefriw church was built for Llewellyn and it's builders and those of Hafod used the same primary unit of measurement, namely 16 feet.

Llewellyn's main seat was at Abergwyngregyn, and, in a remarkably similar location to Hafod, vis a vis the Prince's house and the church, is an Elizabethan manor house with a tower. Some experts believe that is built on the remains of a 13th century house, of which the tower is the only intact part. Interestingly, both houses had a gatehouse, whose names incorporate the welsh word for holly; celyn

If this is correct it makes Hafod the oldest, continually inhabited house in Wales, by a factor of nearly 200 years.

Subsequently the hall was taken up to 3 stories. However, part of that was built off a 19 inch wall. which was only intended as an internal partition and proved too narrow to support 3 stories, so, in about 1629, the house was re-built and extended, largely creating the present building.