

Court House, Llanvair Discoed -2018

The Court House is a well-known property in the village of Llanvair Discoed, The village is mentioned briefly in Domesday, and may have been fairly busy with a castle and weekly market in C14th, but probably suffered very badly in the Black Death c1350. A record from 1372 refers to doves nesting 'in the hall and other rooms of the manor', perhaps a reference to an earlier building on the Court House site [how many pottery frags?]. The manor of LD was owned by several Norman families before it passed into the hands of the Kemeys family, who owned the very large house at Cefn Mably. Rhys Kemeys bought property in the village in c1587-1610, and when he died in 1610-33 his will left his house "where I now dwell at Llanvair" to his wife. Rhy's first son inherited Cefn Mably, and the Court House probably passed eventually to his second (then living) son NK, who we assume lived here when young. He, NK, inherited Cefn Mably in 1637 (aged about 40). He commanded the Royalist garrison and was famously killed at the end of the siege, of Chepstow Castle in 1649.

His son George (d1696) and nephew George (d1702) were the last of the family to live at the Court House. Thereafter it was let out to tenant farmers (eg Pritchards). Ownership passed out of the Kemeys-Tynte family in 1921, and it was acquired in 1937 by the Welsh Land Resettlement Society, then in 1950 by the Min of Ag. They sold in 1959 since when the House has been in private hands.

The name Court House probably refers to its function as a manorial court for keeping records of farm tenancies, collecting rents, holding 'Courts Baron' on tenants behaviour, though with its early history something of a mystery we cannot be sure.

The pound in the northwest corner of the garden was the village pound where stray animals would be impounded, and returned on payment of a fine. In the early 1900s it seems to have been used as a rubbish tip.

There are rumours of a tunnel from the house under the road towards the castle. No traces found; perhaps a drain. The subsidence in the central chimney predates the 1940s and may have been caused by a collapsing drain in the cellar of this house or an earlier structure. There was a cellar under the house but we have not been able to locate it. The washhouse behind the main building still shows traces of its function and may also have been servants quarters. The garage was no doubt built as a carhouse in the C19th. There was an earlier extension where the utility rooms now sit. This seems to have been demolished with some of the rubble buried on site, perhaps in 1950s/60s.

A tablet set into the porch is dated 1635, and has an inscription in an archaic form of Welsh (which would probably not have been in use in say 1700). It has been suggested that the house is later in style, probably because of the way the eaves are tweaked up into a 'gablet' in the centre of the top floor. However we have found traces of timber suggesting that the gablet was a later edition. There are several interpretations of the inscription but recently it has been suggested that in archaic legal Welsh it could read something like "though I am of stone I remain subject to the law". Given that NK, the probable owner in 1635, was created Steward of Court Baron of the manor (and Ranger and had held the position of Sheriff previously) for 1635, we now think the plaque may refer to him, and that the main part of the house was indeed built 1600-1635.

Kemeys family

Sir Nicholas Kemeys , second son of Rhys Kemeys of LD . By 1637 NK was of Bertholey (a few miles from LD) . In 1632 he was sheriff, and 1635 he was Ranger of Wentwood.

In 1637 he inherited from a distant relative the grand Cefn Mably.

George Kemeys the 3rd son of Rhys Kemeys lived at LD, where he was buried in 1696.

In 1649, NK was killed at the end of the siege of Chepstow Castle.

NK and GK gave money and silver to Jesus College Oxford.

The House

Pevsner guide says that despite 1635 date stone in porch, style of house ,presumably the attic window, suggests a date of c1700.

However research and recent evidence suggests an earlier date,viz:

A recent suggestion for the translation of the date stone runs something like "Though I am of stone I remain subject to the law" NK being Ranger in 1635, it is not too fanciful to imagine that he paid for the date stone on his appointment

External redecoration revealed fragments of timber wallplate buried in masonry to side of attic window, in line with top of wall to side of window. This strongly suggests that attic window was a later addition.

Test pit in front garden in 2015 revealed several clay pipes from 1660-80 (probably) with fragments of building material { and pottery dated} This is consistent with a theory that the house of known royalists may have been refurbished after the Restoration in 1660, and the style then updated.

We prefer the timeline that suggests the house was originally built in the early 1600's (refer Bradney), by Rhys Kemeys after he bought LD in 1587-1610 and before he died in 1610-1633.

We do not know what happened between the demise of the castle at LD , perhaps around the time of the Black Death { see dovecote quote} which probably decimated the village{ data on eg Caldicot}. If the remains of the medieval village are ever excavated we may learn more. Perhaps CH sits on the site of an earlier manor house, or perhaps that would have been built closer to the castle.

Garden finds:

Near front porch..roman coin c. 270, silver Schleswig coin dated 1682 ,large key, a few pennies c 1775 and 1806.

Front lawn.. see above re test pit ..also piece of slag

Various near house.....several pieces slipware pottery c.1700s , a few pieces medieval pottery, much victorian china, a few victorian and later copper coins, many pieces clay pipe