

North West Wales Dendrochronology Project Uchel Dref, Corwen, Denbighshire



**EAS Client Report 2009/20
December 2009**

**Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd
Unit 2 Glanypwll Workshops
Ffordd Tanygrisiau
Blaenau Ffestiniog
Gwynedd
LL41 3NW**



Registered in England N° 286978

A report commissioned by The North West Wales Dendrochronology Project in partnership with The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW).

North West Wales Dendrochronology Project Uchel Dref, Corwen, Denbighshire

EAS Client Report 2009/20

**Commissioned by
Margaret Dunn
For
North West Wales Dendrochronology Project**

December 2009

**By
I.P. Brooks and K. Laws**

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North West Wales Dendrochronology Project

Uchel Dref, Corwen

SJ 0490 4518

NPRN 28879

Status: Grade II* Listed

Introduction

This report details the recording of Uchel Dref, undertaken to compliment both the dendrochronological sampling, undertaken by Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory, and the documentary study undertaken by volunteers for the North Wales Dendrochronology Project. The fieldwork took place on 25th November 2009.

Methodology

The survey of this house was based on a plan made for The Anthony Clark Partnership with modifications. The drawings of the timberwork were carried out by direct measurement at a scale of 1:20. Photographs were taken with a Nikon D80 digital SLR camera at a resolution of 10.2 mega pixels. Where practical all the photographs included a metric scale

Survey Report

Uchel Dref is a large stone built winged gentry house approximately 1.3 km NNW from Rüg at a height of approximately 245 m OD (Figure 1). It is part of a small complex consisting of Uchel Dref itself, another cottage and a range of farm buildings which are assumed to have been a farmstead. The road runs along the western and northern sides of the house before running through the centre of the complex of buildings. In plan Uchel Dref has a “C” plan with a shorter northern wing and longer southern wing giving rise to an eastern courtyard between the wings. The main range is aligned NNW – SSE and is of two storeys (Plate 1) with a central chimney and a secondary chimney that clearly was on the northern gable end, but now sits at the junction between the original building and a linking structure to the northern wing. Both the walls facing onto the road and into the courtyard (Plate 2) are rendered and there are two large buttresses supporting the western side of the building. This wing is clearly stone built with random or semi coursed stonework as is seen at the junction between the main range and the south wing (Plate 3). The roof is covered with modern slate with stone ridge tiles and coping on the northern end.

The long, south wing (Plate 4) is clearly an addition to the original building. It is one and a half storey high and constructed of semi-coursed stonework. There is

a single, slim, brick built chimney centrally placed on the ridge. The roof is covered in slate and the use of two different coloured slates on the roof would suggest that major repairs have been carried out at some point in its relatively recent history. Two blocked opening high on the southern face suggests there may have been dormer windows facing south (Plate 5). The general character of this wing would suggest it may have been partly agricultural in nature, however if there were dormer windows it is possible that there was servant accommodation in the roof space.

The northern wing (Plate 6) is linked to the main range with a short transverse section. Constructed of a mixture of large random stonework and coursed, thick stone slabs there is some suggestion that this wing may have had a complex history. On its northern side this wing is partly sunk into the slope so that there are a series of small windows at ground level and a short flight of step up to a door (Plate 7). On the southern (courtyard) side the wing is finished with a series of square cut, coursed stone slabs, now painted white (Plate 8). There is a stone chimney on the eastern gable end.

Inside the property the recording concentrated on the areas of the building which were subjected to dendrochronological dating. Three trusses were located which related to what is assumed to be the original range. Two of these (Figure 3) were located in the attic in the central section of the range. Both trusses (Plates 8 – 10) have collars and are marked with carpenters marks. Truss 1 has a simple chisel mark on the collar (Plate 11) whilst Truss 2 has an inverted “y” (Plate 12). There is some indication of a possible partition below Truss 1 in the form of two slots cut into the southern side of the collar. The eastern side of both trusses have common purlins which are trenched. On the western side, however, whilst Truss 1 has trenched purlins, Truss 2 has an upper trenched purlin and a lower purlin in a blocking piece. The third truss is exposed in the upper storey room at the southern end of the range. It is far more complex in its design (Figure 4) and was clearly meant to be seen. The truss (Plate 13) has a tie-beam supporting queen struts to a high collar. Above the collar are two raking braces. The queen struts have a beam set between them, slightly above the tie-beam which has a series of mortice holes along its length (Plate 14). There are also five raking braces each side of the queen struts giving a decorative appearance to this truss. There is little sign of weather damage to this truss, suggesting it was never an external feature. The eastern side of the truss is supported by a post which can be traced, almost to ground level in the room below. Peg holes in the western end of the tie-beam would suggest that there was a matching post which has now been lost. Other peg holes on the tie beam suggest there may have been other vertical elements below the tie-beam which have also been lost.

Trusses 1 and 2 of the main wing sit on the other side of the main chimney from Truss 3 and access to the attic is via a short flight of stairs alongside the chimney breast. At the head of these stairs is a door with a flat pointed door head (Plate

15) of late sixteenth, or early seventeenth, century type (Alcock and Hall, 1994, 20).

Two trusses were recorded in the South Wing, both in the first floor room at the western end of the wing. Indeed Truss 1 effectively marks the join between the South wing and the main range. Truss 1 (in the South Wing) has a tie-beam and a straight collar separated by a series of nine studs (Plate 16). There are also three studs above the collar and six below the tie-beam. At the northern end of the tie-beam the width of the beam has been reduced to produce a slightly curved door head. One of the studs below the tie-beam is clearly later as it blocks the door opening. The truss has been disturbed in more recent times with the insertion of a new door through the partition. Below Truss 1, of the South Wing, on the ground floor, is a wooden post and plank partition, dividing the main range from the South Wing (Plate 18). A slot in the middle portion of the partition would suggest that the western, ground floor room of the south wing was divided laterally (Plate 19). This slot continues on the underside of the ceiling beam in this room. Truss 2 is much simpler with a single collar and trenched purlins (Plate 17).

The two main rooms on the ground floor of the main range sit either side of the main chimney; the largest room is now used as a kitchen. Accessed through a door to the west of the fireplace in the current kitchen is an awkward space with a curved southern wall which appears to match with a similar space on the first floor. The function of this space is uncertain; however, it may have housed a staircase beside the chimney breast. The current staircase is on the eastern side of the main chimney (Plate 20). The staircase is dated to 1686 on the newel posts (Plates 21 and 22) it has a combination of lower splat balusters and upper turned balusters. The under stair cupboard has a pierced motif which appear to be contemporary with the staircase as does the carved newel post at the head of the stairs (Plate 23).

The large fireplace in the southern, ground floor room (Plate 24) of the main range would suggest that this room may have originally been the kitchen. The ceiling has a longitudinal beam, partly embedded in the eastern side of the chimney breast and a lateral beam running from the longitudinal beam to the western wall. The majority of the joists run north-south, however a range of joist between the longitudinal beam and the partition run east-west. The longitudinal beam has two empty stopped lap joints towards its southern end suggesting the position of a partition (Plate 25). The lateral beam is chamfered by approximately 40 mm and has straight stops at both ends. The joists meeting this beam are slightly offset from one another (Plate 26).

In the room now used as a kitchen the ceiling consisted of two lateral and one longitudinal beam together with a range of joists. Both of the lateral beams originally extended across the full width of the building, including the current hallway, although the southern beam has been truncated (Plate 27). The joists

and beams have 'spade' stops and moderate chamfering (Plate 28). The northern lateral beam has a series of six mortice holes separated by groups of four dowel holes suggesting the position of a partition. To the north of this beam the joists are set longitudinally (at right angles to the rest of the joists in this room) and they are of a plain form. A trimming joist in the south east corner of this run of joist may suggest the position of an opening to the room above (Plate 29).

The ceiling of the passage between the main range and the northern wing was also sampled. Here a series of joists span the corridor (Plate 30) between two longitudinal beams into which they are trenched (Plate 31).

The bedroom above the kitchen has a ceiling with a beam resting on wooden supports (Plate 32). It is met by coffers which are tenoned into the main beam and have the joists trenched into their top surface (Plate 33).

The trusses in the northern wing are relatively simple with tie beams and a collar pegged into the principal rafters. Mortice holes in the tie-beams suggest the presence of a floor at tie-beam height now lost (Plate 34). On the ground floor the timberwork appears to be rather rustic (Plate 35) and is probably relatively modern in date

Dendrochronology Sampling

Thirteen samples were taken from this house. Seven of these were from the main range, four from the trusses of the southern wing and two from the ceiling timbers of the linking passage between the main range and the northern wing.

Conclusions

Uchel Dref has a complex history which the dendrochronological dating will hopefully clarify, however a number of potential phases have been recognised

1. The original house consisted of the main range, possibly with a short southern wing. There was a back-to-back chimney heating two ground floor rooms, the southern of which was probably the kitchen. It is possible that the staircase was to the west of the chimney with access from the main ground floor room. It is possible that there was a parlour in the western end of the current South Wing, separated from the kitchen by the post and plank partition. This parlour may have been sub-divided as is shown by the slot in the ceiling beam in this room.
2. In the seventeenth century the house was modified and the staircase moved to the east side of the chimney. This modification is probably contemporary with the 1686 date on the newel posts.

3. Both the North and South Wings appear to be additions, although the North Wing is probably later than the South Wing. At one point the South Wing had dormer windows on the southern side which were removed, probably when the wing was re-roofed.

Acknowledgments

The recording of this building was commissioned by Margaret Dunn for the North Wales Dendrochronology Project and she also organised access to the building. The forbearance of the owners during the recording of the house is gratefully acknowledged. The buildings were also visited by Richard Suggett of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, whose analysis of the buildings was extremely useful. The plans were based on existing plans drawn for the Anthony Clark Partnership prior to the latest modifications to the house.

References

- Alcock, N.W. and Hall, L. 1994 *Fixtures and fittings in dated houses 1567-1763*. Council for British Archaeology.
- Haslam, R., Orbach, J and Voelcker, A. 2009 *The Buildings of Wales. Gwynedd. Anglesey, Caernarvonshire and Merioneth*. Yale University Press, London



Plate 1: Uchel Dref, looking east



A report commissioned by The North West Wales Dendrochronology Project in partnership with The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW).

Plate 2: The courtyard looking west



Plate 3: The junction between the main range and the south wing, looking NW



Plate 4: The south wing looking north



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Plate 5: Blocked openings in the southern wing, looking NE



Plate 6: South Wing looking SW



Plate 7: Low set window and steps to doorway in the northern wing, looking SSW



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Plate 8: North wing looking NW



Plate 9: Main range, truss 1, looking north



Plate 10: Main range, truss 2, looking south



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Plate 11: Carpenter's mark on Truss 1, looking south



Plate 12: Carpenter's mark, on Truss 2, looking south



Plate 13: Truss 3 in the main range, looking NW



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Plate 14: Central section of Truss 3 in the main range, looking north



Plate 15: Attic door, looking south



Plate 16: South Wing, Truss 1, looking NW



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Plate 17: South Wing, Truss 2, looking east



Plate 18: Partition between the main range and the South Wing, looking west



Plate 19: Position of a partition in the western ground floor room, South Wing, looking south



Plate 20: Staircase, looking NW



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Plates 21 and 22: Newel Posts, looking north



Plate 23: Carved newel post at head of stairs.



Plate 24: Large fireplace, looking north



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Plate 25: Empty stopped lap joints in longitudinal beam, looking east



Plate 26: Offset joists in ceiling of southern ground floor room



Plate 27: Truncated beam in hallway, looking SW



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Plate 28: 'Spade' stop on joist in the kitchen



Plate 29: Trimming joist in ceiling of kitchen



Plate 30: Corridor linking the main range to the North Wing, looking north



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Plate 31: Trenched joists in corridor linking main range to North Wing, looking west



Plate 32: Beam resting on wooden supports in bedroom above kitchen, looking west



Plate 33: Joint between main beam and coffer in bedroom above the kitchen



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Plate 34: Truss in the North Wing, looking east



Plate 35: Ground floor in the North Wing, looking east

Appendix 1: Sources

Listing Information

UCHEL-DREF, UCHELDREF

Street Name and Number: ,

Listed Building Reference: 661

Grade: II*

Date Listed: 04/06/1952

Date Amended: 01/02/1995

Co-ordinates: 304904,345184

Locality:

Community: Corwen

Council: Denbighshire

National Park: No

Location

History

Interior

Exterior

661 On a minor lane linking outlying farms in the NW of the community, 2km approx. W of the A494 Bala-Ruthin Road, and 1.5km N of the A5 at Pont Melin Rug. History: The house is reputed to have originated as a grange of Valle Crucis Abbey. The present buildings form at least two distinct phases, built round a courtyard. The main range contains a staircase dated 1686, but this is almost certainly the date of a major remodelling of existing buildings. The character of some of the internal timber framing suggests an earlier building date, probably in the C16. The original building was possibly L-shaped, comprising a down-hill sited range to the S, with a cross-wing to its W: the present S wing, and the SW bay of the W range appear to be a single phase of construction, but contain roof-trusses at right angles to each other; the continuation of the W range to the N (beyond the axial chimney stack) has lower ceiling heights, and simpler trusses, and may be a slightly later phase of building, or the result of remodelling when the staircase was inserted. This range was later extended, and a N wing added, probably during the C18. The present entrance, and the fenestration of the buildings are secondary. Exterior: Built around 3 sides of a courtyard, with the main range aligned roughly N-S enclosing the W side of the courtyard. This is 2 storeyed with attics, and comprises 2 principal rooms separated by a large axial stack. Whitewashed render over stone with slate roof. Central entrance in slightly advanced bay, with 2-light casement windows to either side of it on each floor, and a 9-pane window above the doorway. Its outer elevation has windows grouped to either side of the axial stack, with 3 windows to the left, and 2 to the right, with substantial buttresses between the windows. The line of this range was

later extended by a single bay of less height to the right, occupying the outer angle between the main range and the N wing. This wing which is also a later addition, has well coursed and squared tooled stonework to its inner wall. Central doorway flanked by casement windows on each floor, the upper windows of tall proportions. Outer wall has 2 small windows to ground floor in chamfered splays and 2 x2-light casement windows and a doorway up steps above. Coped gables with moulded kneelers, and gable end stack. S wing may be part of the earliest building on the site, and is largely blind in its elevation to the courtyard, with a single 2-light casement window with 9-pane dormer over towards its angle with the main range. Its upper section is a later non-domestic extension, and is open at the gable end. Interior: W range comprises 2 rooms divided by axial stack, and now has a passage way running along its inner side, with internal glazing re-using the iron casement windows which had previously been used in the rear wall. Present kitchen has heavy chamfered beams with run-out stops panelling the ceiling, and stop-chamfered joists. Rougher detail in N bay suggests that at one time the room was partitioned. Low chamfered bressumer to fireplace, and shallow ogee arched lintel to closet alongside it. Staircase is alongside the stack on the inner side of the building: dated on the newels 1686 and richly decorated with reeding to newels, and ornate finials, including a pendant finial to overarch at foot of stairs; splat balusters to either side. Chamfered bressumer to fireplace of the S room, which has a high ceiling with stop-chamfered beams and joists. A post and panel partition on a stone plinth separates this room from the SE wing, but may have been inserted to subdivide a larger room, since the siting of the main ceiling beams is somewhat at odds with the positioning of the partition. The ceiling height and character of the ceiling timbers (stop-chamfered transverse beams, and chamfered joists) in the SE room also suggest that it is a continuation of the hall. Its easternmost beam is grooved for a partition. The northern part of the main range has lower ceiling heights and accommodates an attic storey. The southern bay, which has higher ceiling heights, is of 2 storeys only. A highly ornamental closed truss subdivides the first floor of the southern bay: herringbone braces to either side of queen posts over roughly chamfered tie beam, and raking struts over collar. The western roof truss in the SE wing appears to be of the same phase of construction, and is similarly enriched with close studding above the tie beam. In both trusses, the tie beam is above the floor level, which is spanned by another transverse beam. The 3 bays in the attic over the N section have simpler trusses, with slightly cambered collars. First floor rooms (the layout altered by the creation of an internal corridor) have ceilings panelled by heavy stop-chamfered beams, including wall plates. The quality of construction and decorative detail, together with its scale suggest that Uchel-Dref was a building of some importance. It retains much of the character of a sub-medieval house, and the courtyard plan form which has developed over a period of time is an unusual and striking layout.

Reason for Listing

A report commissioned by The North West Wales Dendrochronology Project in partnership with The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW).

References

Haslam, R., Orbach, J and Voelcker, A. 2009 *The Buildings of Wales. Gwynedd. Anglesey, Caernarvonshire and Merioneth.* Yale University Press, London (702).

UCHELDREF, 1m. N. Backing onto a lane, a whitened rendered C17 house with corniced chimneys and irregular windows. Tall square chimneys. Two wings enclose a small E courtyard, the centre of the narrow E front slightly projected. The NE wing has stonework evidence of being raised in the C18th. It is suggested by Cadw that the SE wing may be the original house, with a cross-wing, now the S end of the main range, earlier than the good staircase dated 1686, which is against the centre chimney. Flat balusters, reeded newels and carved finials.