

North West Wales Dendrochronology Project Branas-uchaf, Llandrillo, Denbighshire



**EAS Client Report 2009/21
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
Branas-uchaf, Llandrillo,
Denbighshire**

EAS Client Report 2009/21

**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

Branas-uchaf, Llandrillo, Denbighshire

SJ 0149 3730

NPRN 28196

Status: Grade II* Listed

Introduction

This report details the recording of the house Branas-uchaf, 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 1st December 2009.

Methodology

The ground floor plan, produced by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales for the Caernarvonshire Inventory (1964), was used as the base for the study of this house. It was slightly adjusted to include modifications made after the survey. The first storey plan was made by direct measurement. 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

Branas-uchaf sits on the floodplain north of the River Dee, approximately 2 km west of Llandrillo (Figure 1). Whilst no longer part of the farm it is approached along a lane through a series of agricultural building to which it was once linked. The original house was a single range aligned approximately NE – SW, however a large wing has been added to the north-east end and a small wing to the north-west end (Figure 2).

The main range is a two storey, stone built range constructed of random stone work with large long and short work quoins, particularly on the lower portion of the walls (Plate 1). The upper portions of the walls are of smaller stones suggesting that the house has been heightened. There are three chimneys in this range, one on each gable end and a third as a central ridge chimney. The north eastern chimney is particularly noteworthy. It is clearly an addition to the original building; however it is very prominent and has a marked diagonal shaft with

lateral ribs (Plate 2). This is very similar to that recorded at Maes Tyddyn only 1.5 km to the east.

The ground floor windows consist of a series of stone ovolo moulded mullions (Figure 6) with relatively thin, tall openings. The majority of the windows have three lights (Plate 3), although the windows to the north east of the door and opposite the door, on the NW wall, have only two lights (Plate 4). The windows have flat, hoodmoulds. The larger window in the northwest wall, of this range, has been blocked, but on the outside retains the stone frame and hoodmould (Plate 5). The smaller window is partly blocked by the later extension (Plate 6).

Two doors were recorded, only one of which now gives access to the outside. These have cyclopean door jambs and pointed, stone, doorheads (Plates 7-9). An opening low down at the southwest end of the building suggests there is a cellar below, at least, at this end of the building (Plate 10).

The small added wing at the south western end of the house is constructed of random stonework, it has two windows and an external door, although it has no direct access to the main range. The window in the south west face is small with a stone slab casement (Plate 11) whereas that on the ground floor of the gable end (northwest) is a 'two light', mullioned window plain mullions (Plate 12). The door is very similar in character to that in the main range with cyclopean jambs and a pointed stone head (Plate 13).

The northeast wing is clearly a late addition, with at least two phases of its own (Plates 14 – 16). The first phase was attached to the north eastern end of the original range. It has a set of external steps which presumably gave access to servant accommodation on the first floor. This wing has a single chimney on the gable end. The wing was then extended to the northwest with a single storey extension. This gave rise to a somewhat uncomfortable relationship between the NE wing and the main range as it partly blocked the window giving light onto the hall and stair well (Plate 17). There are two blocked opening on the northwest side of this wing which relate to blocked doorways no longer in use. There is also a curious blocking between the main gable end chimney and the NE wing (Plate 2) which seems too small to have been a doorway and it is positioned in what would have been the north west corner of the original house making it structurally unlikely that there was a door in this position. It is possible that this blocking is simply filling an awkward gap created by the construction of the NE Wing.

Internally the majority of the trusses are either hidden or heavily coated in plaster making them difficult to record. The best exposure is for Truss 1 (Figure 3, Plates 18 and 19) towards the northwest end of the main range. Although heavily plastered the general form of the curved principal rafters is evident suggesting the use of cruck frames for at least part of the construction. The lower purlin on the north side of the range is exposed (although covered in plaster) along the

upper hallway. It has straight, windbraces (Figure 3, Plates 20 and 21) linking it to Truss 2 and 3 and the upper purlin has evidence for windbraces to Trusses 3 and 4 (Plate 22). Truss 2 only has limited exposure; however, in the roof space it was visible from an inspection hatch. There is a cusped insert between the peak of the principal rafters (Plate 23) which appears to be restricted to this truss only. Where it was possible to inspect the other trusses the equivalent insert was a straight piece of timber (Plate 24).

Between the main range and the south west wing, on the first floor the separation consists of a timber framed partition which also forms a roof truss for the added wing (Figure 4). In the main range this has been heavily plastered, although its form is discernable (Plate 25). When viewed from the wing, however, its form is clear (Plate 26). There is a tie-beam with queen struts linked to a straight collar with studs below the tie-beam. These studs are now very short running as far as a wall plate sitting on a brick wall made of modern bricks. The relationship between the wing and the main range on the ground floor is uncertain as this face has a coating of modern render. There is also a short flight of, dog legged, stone stairs (Plate 27) within this wing.

The trusses within the northwest wing (Figure 5, Plates 28 - 30) are king post trusses with raking braces. The braces join the king post at carefully crafted bosses. The king post itself rests on a tie-beam and is also shaped at its top to allow the principal rafters to join (Plate 30). The most southerly of the trusses (Truss 7) also has carpenter's marks on the base of the king post and on its braces in the form of chiselled slots (Plate 31).

The ground floor of the main range consists of three main rooms and the entrance hall/staircase. The staircase (Plate 32) has a short straight flight to a half landing where two further flights give access to passageways running along the north western side of the range. It has flat splat balusters (Plate 33) and a carved newel post (Plate 34). It appears to have been constructed in what was originally the cross passage and now sits behind the central chimney, which was presumably added at a similar date. The form of the balusters and newel post would suggest a seventeenth century date (Alcock *et al* 1994, 6, Calloway, 2005, 66).

The north eastern room in the main range has the large fireplace which is related to the gable chimney with the diagonal shaft (Plate 35). It is likely that this room acted as the kitchen after the construction of the gable end chimney. The ceiling of this room is timbered with a main beam in the middle of the room and a series of joists running longitudinally. The main beam has a second timber attached to its eastern side forming a ledge against which it is possible that there was a partition at some point in the past (Figure 7). There are also blocked, mortice holes on the under side of the main beam also suggesting a lost partition (Plate 36). The dismantled post and plank partition, now stacked in the south west

ground floor room may have come from here, however Suggett (*pers. comm.*) suggests they were from the partition between the southwest and central ground floor rooms. The joists are in a different pattern on either side of the main beam with those between the beam and the fireplace having a more regular pattern. There are also the remains of a lower joist or beam in the SW wall of the room (Plate 37) suggesting that the ceiling may have been raised.

The central ground floor room has an inserted fireplace (Plate 38) which sits between the cross passage and Truss 2, the foot of which is visible in the southern wall of this room (Plate 39). The ceiling in this room has counter changing joists between a framework of chamfered longitudinal beam and lateral coffers (Figure 7, Plate 40). Both the coffers and the beam have angled stops.

There is a step up into the south western room of the range, presumably to accommodate the cellar below. This room has a fine timbered ceiling with moulded beams and joists (Figure 7, Plate 41 - 45). Three of the joists are later (plain) replacements. It is possible that there was access to the upper floor at this point as there are the mortice holes for a trimmer on the surviving joists either side of the replaced joists (Plate 46). The partition between the central and SW rooms is panelled (Plate 47), although it is thought that this panelling replaced an earlier post and plank partition, the mortice holes for which are still visible above the doorway between the two rooms (Plate 48).

Above the stairwell there is a timber partition (Plate 49) forming a wide shelf. Whilst part of this is constructed of timber the panels are of woven laths which have been plastered (Plate 50). The structure is attached to Truss 4 (Plate 51) and runs back to the back of the inserted central chimney and the line of Truss 3.

Dendrochronology Sampling

Sixteen samples were taken from Branas-uchaf, largely from the main range. These sampled both the roof timbers and the ceiling beams. One sample was taken from a tie beam in the NE wing. Samples were also taken from the dismantled post and plank partition assumed, by Suggett to divide the central and SW ground floor rooms, although other possible locations exist within the building including below the ceiling beam in the northeast ground floor room.

Conclusions

Branas-uchaf clearly has a long and complex history. The original house would appear to be a five bay hall house with a cross passage whose footprint has defined most of the later developments. The possible development is summarised below:

1. A five bayed hall house with a cross passage, possibly of cruck frame construction with stone walls of massive block randomly laid. The

presence of cusping on Truss 2 and not on Truss 4 would suggest that the south west end of the building was the hall, whilst the service range was to the north east of the passage. It is not certain whether the doors with pointed heads are from this phase or slightly later.

2. The gable end chimney was added to the north east end of the range, probably to the kitchen. A chimney is also inserted between Truss 2 and the cross passage. It is possible that the first floor was also added at this point.
3. It is likely that the staircase was added in the seventeenth century as were the mullioned windows. This probably included the blocking of the northern, cross passage, doorway to allow for the staircase. This major refit probably included the re-timbering of the ceilings. It is not certain when the outer walls were heightened, although the high level of the mullion window lighting the staircase would suggest that at least the heightening of the back wall is contemporary with the inserting of the mullioned windows.
4. The front, first floor windows are wooden casement windows unlikely to be contemporary with the mullioned windows; however, there is no obvious evidence for earlier windows on the front upper storey.
5. The south west wing was added, possibly incorporating earlier features such as the pointed doorway. It is possible that this wing was also accessible from the main house, although this relationship is now lost.
6. The north east (kitchen) wing was added, possibly in the eighteenth century. The provision of external stairs would suggest that there was a servants quarters on the first floor, probably with a kitchen below.
7. The north east range was extended to the west, partly blocking one of the mullioned windows in the main range.
8. Minor blocking of some of the doors and windows.
9. Renovation works currently being carried out by the owners.

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 owner and tenants 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.

References

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- Calloway, S. 2005 *The elements of style. An encyclopedia of domestic architectural detail*. Octopus Publishing Group Ltd, London
- Haslam, R., Orbach, J and Voelcker, A. 2009 *The Buildings of Wales. Gwynedd. Anglesey, Caernarvonshire and Merioneth*. Yale University Press, London
- Smith, P. 2001 Houses c.1415 – c.1642. in Beverley Smith, J and Beverley Smith, L (eds.) *History of Merioneth, Volume II: The Middle Ages*. Merioneth Historical and Record Society



Plate 1: Branas-uchaf looking north.



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: North eastern gable end chimney, looking SW



Plate 3: Three light mullioned window, looking NW



Plate 4: Two light mullioned window, looking NW



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Plate 5: Blocked window, looking SE



Plate 6: Window partly blocked by later extension, looking east



Plate 7: Main door, looking NW



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 8: Main door, looking SE



Plate 9: Door between main range and the kitchen, looking NW



Plate 10: Cellar light and three light mullioned window, looking NW



Plate 11: Small window in the SW range, looking NE

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Plate 12: Mullioned window in SW range, looking SE



Plate 13: Door to the SW wing, looking SW



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Plate 14: NE Wing, looking NW



Plate 15: NE wing, looking SE



Plate 16: NE wing, looking NNE



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Plate 17: Obstructed window at the head of the stairs, looking NW



Plate 18: Truss 1, looking north



Plate 19: Truss 1, looking east



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Plate 20: Windbrace between the lower purlin and Truss 2, looking north



Plate 21: Windbraces and common rafters between Trusses 2 and 3, looking NW



Plate 22: Windbraces below the upper purlin between Trusses 3 and 4, looking west



Plate 23: Cusped insert at the peak of Truss 2, looking west



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 24: Straight insert at the peak of Truss 3, looking SW



Plate 25: Partition between the main range and the SW Wing, looking NW



Plate 26: Partition between the main range and SW Wing, looking SE



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 27: Staircase in the SW Wing, looking south



Plate 28: Truss 7 looking north



Plate 29: Base of Truss 8, looking north



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Plate 30: Top of Truss 8, looking SE



Plate 31: Carpenter's marks on Truss 7, looking NW



Plate 32: The staircase, looking NW



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 33: The splat balusters, looking SE



Plate 34: The newel post, looking SE



Plate 35: The fireplace at the NE end of the main range, looking NE



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 36: Underside of ceiling beam in NW room of main range



Plate 37: Sawn off joist in NE ground floor room, looking west



Plate 38: Fireplace in central ground floor room, looking NE



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 39: Foot of Truss 2, looking SE



Plate 40: Ceiling of the central ground floor room, looking up



Plate 41: SW ground floor room, looking NW



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 42: Moulded beam and joists in SW ground floor room, looking up



Plate 43: Detail of moulding on ceiling beam in SW ground floor room, looking NW



Plate 44: Detail of moulding on ceiling beam in SW ground floor room, looking SE



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 45: Detail of stop on ceiling beam in ground floor SW room, looking SE



Plate 46: Mortice hole for a lost trimmer in ground floor SW room, looking NW



Plate 47: Panelling between the Central and SW ground floor rooms, looking NE



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 48: Evidence for post and plank partition between central and SW ground floor rooms, looking up.



Plate 49: Partitioned shelf over the stairwell, looking NW



Plate 50: Woven lath panel in partition over stairwell, looking SW



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 51: Join between Truss 4 and the partition over the stair well, looking north

Appendix 1: Sources

Haslam, R., Orbach, J and Voelcker, A. 2009 *The Buildings of Wales. Gwynedd, Anglesey, Caernarvonshire and Merioneth*. Yale University Press, London, 628.

BRANAS UCHAF, 1 ½ m. W. An important C15 cruck-framed hall house, possibly always of stone, from the Tudor doorway. C16 or early C17 end wall and centre chimneys, the E one diagonally set. The ground-floor windows have stone mullions, the shallow ovolo moulding, the long proportions and hoodmoulds suggesting the mid to later C17. Five bays. Two three-light windows l. of the door light the hall and parlour, and a three-light and two-light, r. light outer rooms, the second a kitchen. C18 upper walls and windows and also the NE wing. A rear NW addition, not linked internally to the main house, has a Tudor doorhead, presumably resited. Inserted chimney and passage in the first bay of the two bay hall, the chimney almost obscuring the remnant of an aisled spere-truss, similar to that at Plas Uchaf, Cynwyd. The parlour has late C17 fielded panelling. Two C17 OUTBUILDINGS flank the approach, a barn and lofted cowhouse dated 1607 on a tie-beam. Also a low C18 hay barn.

Smith, P. 2001 Houses c.1415 – c.1642. in Beverley Smith, J and Beverley Smith, L (eds.) *History of Merioneth, Volume II: The Middle Ages*. Merioneth Historical and Record Society, 445

Branas Uchaf (Llandrillo) (SJ 0155 3735). Branäs Uchaf lies on the floor of the Dee Valley not far to the south-west of Plas Uchaf which it much resembles, although it is generally rather smaller. A two-bay cruck framed hall lies in the middle of the range, the outer bay divided into two to provide a screen between the hall and passage. Beyond the passage are two rooms in sequence, as at Plas Uchaf, the outer room with its own outside doorway and latterly at least like Plas Uchaf, a large end-wall fireplace suggesting that this room was a kitchen. In contrast with Plas Uchaf, the original inner room survives, in this case clearly a large parlour, later lined with seventeenth-century small-field panelling, which hides the medieval dias partition. Although the ground-floor plan is complete, little of the medieval roof framework is now visible, while the aisled screen between hall and passage has been almost completely hidden by the later fireplace inserted to heat the hall, and sited backing on the passage.

The outer stone walls indicate three periods of building. The dressed stone doorways with cyclopean jambs and pointed heads, also made of slate slabs, suggest the stone walls are original. The ovolo-moulded mullion windows are clearly part of a seventeenth-century rebuilding probably corresponding to the inserted fireplace, while the walls were evidently raised, probably in the

eighteenth century. There is a remarkably massive and ornate diagonal end-chimney to the outer room probably dating from the sixteenth century. This chimney is closely matched by that at Maes Tyddyn less than a mile across the river Dee to the east. There have been additional wings added to the side of the house.

Listing Information

Branas Uchaf

Street Name and Number: ,

Listed Building Reference: 698

Grade: II*

Date Listed: 20/10/1966

Date Amended: 03/10/2003

Co-ordinates: 301507,337323

Locality: Branas

Community: Llandrillo

Council: Denbighshire

National Park: No

Location

In a fine position overlooking the N banks of the River Dee, approx 2.5km W of Llandrillo. At the end of a track which runs S off a lane which follows the river between Llanderfel and Cynwyd.

History

An aisle-truss cruck-framed hall-house of the C15, which would have had an open hearth. The aisle-truss formed an open screens on the L side of the passage, which led to the hall and inner room; 2 large outer rooms in sequence to R of passage. The lower stone walls are probably original, including fine pointed-arched stone doorways. The house was remodelled in the C16-17 including the addition of 2 large external stacks, one of which was ornate, the insertion of a fireplace behind the open screens, and the insertion of stone mullioned windows. A short rear W wing (an outbuilding) appears to be contemporary. The house was raised to 2 storeys, probably in the C18. A rear service wing was added to the E end in the C18-19.

Interior

No access to interior at time of inspection. The house is said to have a 2-bay hall, the aisle-truss dividing the R-hand bay, with a parlour (formerly inner room) beyond. To R of passage are 2 outer rooms, one used as a kitchen by the C17 with its own chimney and external rear doorway. Part of a spere post is said to be embedded in the inserted fireplace in the hall, whilst the dais partition is said to be hidden behind the C17 panelling of the parlour. A staircase was inserted into the entrance passage. Detail previously recorded include chamfered ceiling beams and joists; pointed arched doorways and original partitions. The E wing

appears to have had a service use, with granary above.

Exterior

Long 2-storey 4-window range facing S, constructed of random grey stone, including very large blocks of medieval masonry to lower walls; slate roofs. Massive external stone stacks to L and R ends, the latter with a pilastered diagonally-set shaft; ridge stack to R of centre. The gable ends show that the house was raised to 2 storeys later, and the gables have raised stone copings. The entrance is to the R of centre, with inserted chimney backing on the entry. Stone pointed-arched doorway with cavetto moulding and monolithic stone jambs containing a boarded door. Lower storey has stone windows with ovolo-moulded mullions, stone hoodmoulds and iron glazing. Two 3-light windows to L of doorway, 2-light window to R of doorway and 3-light window to R end. Upper storey has 4 x 2-light wooden casements with quarries, rising to eaves with stone sills. The W wing is 1-unit and single-storey with loft. It is flush with the gable end of the main range and clearly pre-dates the raising of the house to 2 storeys. The W side has a small stone-lined window; the gable has raised stone copings and a boarded opening to loft. Pointed-arched stone doorway to E side of wing, similar to front entrance, containing a boarded door (the doorway may have been re-set from elsewhere). The rear of the main range has a 3-light stone mullioned window offset to R, the lights infilled with stone. The E wing is 2-storey and 3-window. The front is flush with the external chimney breast and faces E. Stone end stack to R. Upper storey doorway to centre with boarded door reached by external stone stairs. Porch under stairs with C20 boarded door to N side and light to E front. Windows with segmental brick heads flanking porch, with C20 wooden glazing. Two-light casements above, rising to eaves, that to L is C20. Rear of wing has a catslide lean-to, which has a C20 window and some blocked openings (the catslide obscures the original rear doorway of the entrance passage).

Reason for Listing

Listed grade II* as an exceptional regional house with substantial retention of medieval plan-form and fabric, the C16-17 work also particularly fine and well-detailed.

References

Beverley Smith, J & Beverley Smith, L (eds), *History of Merioneth*, Vol II, 2001, Ch. 10 by Peter Smith, pp 429-30, 445-6; Smith, Peter, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, 1988, pp 98, 101; fig 56; maps 12, 19, 20, 22, 29, 43, 49, 50, 53, 54; RCAHM Wales files.