

Notes from Local Interest Group 10th July 2017

Present: Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy and Dainis Ozols, John and Margaret Price, Richard Thomas, Sue and John Ievers, Richard Martin, Neville and Pat Harley, Bill and Ruth Johnson, Deri Jones, Jenny Francis, Christine and Jeremy Rose, Sue Farmer, Evelyn Bally, Roy and Avryl Lloyd, Stephen and Judy Mullard, Richard Harris and Sally Matthews.

Visit to the Ciliau

ML welcomed everyone and introduced Emma Beynon, from the Ciliau, who was on hand to answer questions and to show people around in the house. The house belongs to Roger Capps, who was away sailing in the Arctic and so Emma was deputising for him. ML then gave us an introductory talk about the house, before we went inside, and said that she had brought a selection of photos, old and new, for us to see.

The Ciliau is a Grade 1 listed house because it is "an exceptionally important and well-preserved high-status vernacular house of the 16th century" (CADW). It is a remarkable house for two reasons: firstly, its original 16th century layout still survives; secondly, the detail within the house (such as the carpentry and wall painting) is of a very high quality.

The house was built in the early 16th century, probably by Robert ap Gwilym, chief constable of Painscastle Hundred (1552-53) and a man with social aspirations. He bequeathed the house to his son, John ap Robert, in 1574 and he sold the property in 1579 to Daunce, from Hereford. At this time, the farm was called Tire y Kille (cyll = hazel; saplings). At some time afterwards (the exact date is not known), it became part of the Skreen Estate, which was owned by the Williams family from 1576.

One interesting fact about the Ciliau is that it is one of a very small number of domestic houses that have been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This is because it houses an important colony of Lesser Horseshoe bats. These are located in an upstairs room to which there is no access because they are protected by law.

The Ciliau was built as a hall house, intended to mimic the high-status houses of the time. However, it is not an H-shaped house, rather it is more rectangular in plan. It had a three-bay hall and cross-passage, between storeyed inner (parlour) and outer (service) bays. This layout is still visible today. As you go through the main door, you go into the cross-passage (which no longer goes all the way through to the other side). To the left is the kitchen, to the right is the hall and beyond this is the parlour, which is now divided into two rooms. The original 16th century house was stone built, with the hall open to the roof, whilst the two flanking bays had timber-framed upper storeys. There were two "fireplace stairs" in each of the flanking bays giving access to the upper levels. Right from the start, there was a lateral fireplace (unusual at the time when open fires were more common) and the large chimney on the north side is a major feature of the exterior of the house (could this be a highly visual statement about the owner's importance?). As a result, the timbers in the hall are not smoke-blackened.

In the late 16th or early 17th century, a second storey was added above the hall and a new timber staircase, rising from the hall, was built, probably later in the 17th century. It is thought that the cross-passage was subdivided (to create a small service room to the south) in the 18th century, and that the original doorway was blocked and a new one built in the south wall of the kitchen in the same century.

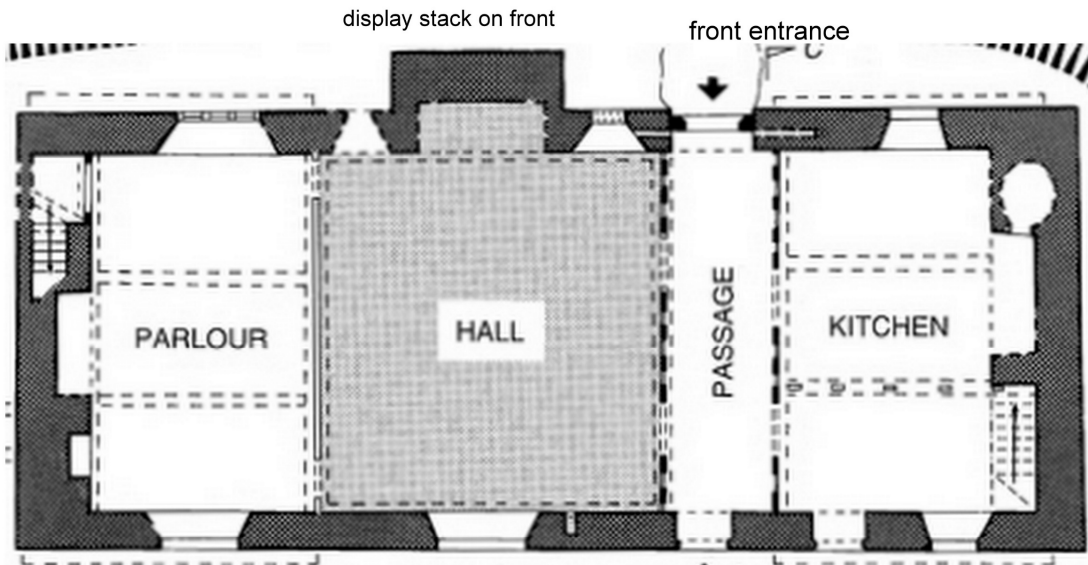


The room to the east of the cross passage is now a kitchen. This has a wide fireplace against the side wall and also a door leading out into the garden beyond.

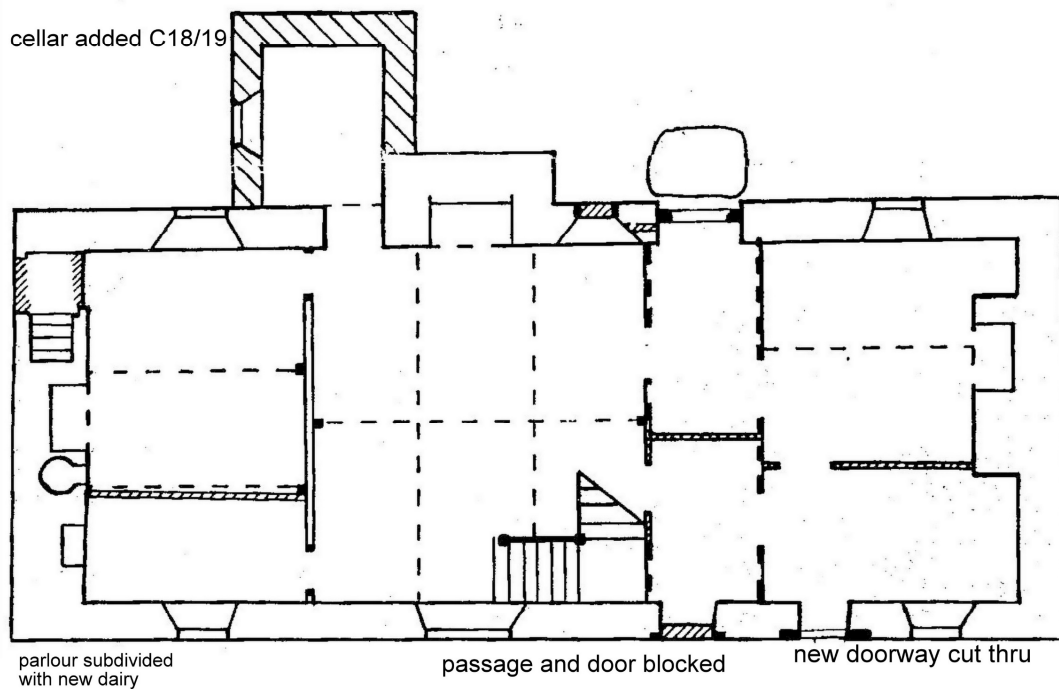
The hall (to the west of the passage) contains some of the most interesting features of the house in the form of wall paintings, possibly one of the most significant examples of domestic wall-painting in Wales and often described as the "treasure" of the house. These date from the 16th century. On the western end of the hall is a wooden partition (separating the hall from the parlour) which is painted, in ochre pigments on a black background, to look like the tapestries that were typical of the late 16th century. It is thought that the owner chose to have the partition painted rather than covering it in a tapestry because the wetter climate in this part of Wales would not have been kind to textiles. One of our group, Richard Harris, suggested that it was more likely that the reason for the painting was that tapestries were extremely expensive items and it would have been improbable that the owner of this house would have been able to afford this. The painting is in a remarkable condition (given its age) and was uncovered by Roger Capps when he removed the wallpaper and plaster that had covered the partition. Along the upper part of the screen are what appear to be garlands of red forming a kind of frieze along the top. These were thought to be strawberries but the consensus now is that they are turning leaves. Beneath this you can see a wonderfully detailed array of curling leaves, flowers and some animals, including birds and a hound with a collar. Roger Capps also discovered more wall paintings beneath the plaster on the walls of the room, including a lion rampant on the side of a previous window and two goats on the wall going up the staircase. It is very probable that there are further paintings, beneath the plasterwork, that are yet to be uncovered.

Back in the 16th century, in front of the wooden screen, there would have had been a dais on which there would have been a long table and bench (high table). This room was the heart of the house and it is here that the owner would have entertained. Everything was designed to impress his

guests; his aim was to display his importance. It is quite possible to imagine the hall being used in this way, with a fire roaring in the large fireplace and lit by candlelight.



Early C16 as built (or rebuilt timber cruck house)
 timber-framed jettied upper storeys to each end
 original fireplace in hall (and heated parlour and service end?)
 roll-moulded timbers, arch-braced trusses, and wallpaintings orig
 also other wall-paintings prior to hall stairs insertion



hall ceiled (later C16?)
 stairs inserted C17

The large window on the south side of the hall would once have gone all the way up to the roof, before the second storey was added. Beside the window is the timber dog-leg staircase. The post at the bottom of the stairs has some unusual circular marks etched into the wood that are signs used to ward off evil. In the past, Emma told us, people would put horse hair into holes in the wood to ward off witches. The staircase has shaped newels with ogee caps and turned balusters.

Beyond the hall, to the west, is the parlour, now divided into two smaller rooms. The remains of the old staircase are still visible alongside the fireplace in one of them.

Upstairs, in the room above the hall, one of the main features you can see is the decoration on the arch-braced collar trusses. Before the addition of the second storey, these would have been visible from the hall below. The room above the kitchen was changed in 1709 and this date is carved into the panel above a doorway, together with some flowers that look like tulips. It is thought that there was a wedding in the house at this time and that this room was prepared for the new bride. It is also believed that the farm buildings outside date from a similar time and could therefore be part of the same improvements.

The house looks impressive from the outside. It is built on an outcrop of solid rock (providing an excellent foundation) set higher than the farm yard. Before the trees grew, it would have had an impressive view down over the Wye Valley and The Garth can be easily seen on the north side. The house is lime-washed stone with a slate roof. On the north side, you can see a blocked window, a very small gabled dormer window in the roof of the hall and the 16th century chimney, which dominates this side of the house. There is also a lean-to, which was added in the 19th century. The front door is in its original location; it has an interesting shaped door-head, probably original. On the south side, the house sits above its garden and to the left of the door to the kitchen you can see a blocked arched doorway; this used to lead into the cross-passage. There are more windows on this side of the house, not surprisingly. The large three-light window of the hall dates from the 19th century.

In the yard on the north side of the house are the outbuildings, most of which date from the 18th century, probably built at the same time that the interior work was done in 1709. The stone buildings form an L-shape, the barn aligned E-W and the attached stable/cowhouse aligned N-S. The barn has two large doorways and ventilation slits; there are two threshing floors inside. Attached to the barn is a cart shed, built later than the other buildings; this has two storeys and there are stone steps outside leading to the doorway on the upper level. If you look at the windows in the upper level of the stable block, you will see a couple of armed men looking down on you - be not afraid, they are only dummies!!

Some years ago, BBC Wales made a short programme about the Ciliau which is well worth watching. You can find the clip on the following link:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/localhistory/hidden_histories/episode_4_ciliau.shtml

At the end of the visit, ML thanked Emma Benyon and Roger Capps for so kindly giving us access to this fascinating and quite extraordinary house. It was a rare opportunity to visit such an important building, one of the finest in Wales, let alone Radnorshire, and we are so grateful to Roger Capps for opening up his home to us, and to Emma for giving up her time to ensure that we got the most out of our visit. We all thoroughly enjoyed our excursion and agreed that the house was looking wonderful in the late evening sunshine.