

## Oernant Uchaf



*Oernant Uchaf in 2023.*

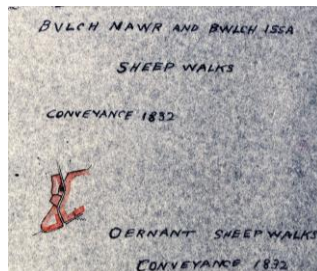


*The land (highlighted blue) and building (highlighted red) of Oernant Uchaf, as marked on the 1819 Ordnance Survey plan. © The British Library Board.*

A key question with Oernant Uchaf is whether it existed before the construction of the new Horseshoe Pass in 1810. We know that it was a cottage used by workers in the quarries below, and that the quarries had been opened before 1700. But was it built alongside the new turnpike road in order to take advantage of the easier access, or does the Horseshoe Pass have the strange little kink in it at that point because it had to go around the already existing house? It is not marked on John Evans' 1795 map of North Wales, but then no buildings at Oernant were on that map and we know that at least Oernant

Isaf existed at that time. Unfortunately, with the existing documentation that we have available at this time, we cannot give a first date for Oernant Uchaf and so the earliest date that we can go back to is when it was marked on a preliminary Ordnance Survey drawing in 1819. However, thirteen years later, Oernant Uchaf was included in a conveyance as part of Bwlch Issa Farm. At that sale Bwlch Issa, including Oernant Uchaf and several other properties was bought by the Tottenham Estate.

Another ten years later we can find out who was living at Oernant Uchaf. The tithe map and apportionment recorded that it was owned and occupied by Ellis Roberts. Comparing with the Census from the same year, 1841, we find that Ellis was a 60 year old slate merchant, living there with his wife Margaret, who was 55. Ellis also owned Tŷ Issa just below. At some point in the following ten years Ellis and Margaret relocated to Pentredŵr, to live in the former Cross Keys at the end of Post Office Row. Into Oernant Uchaf (then called Tŷ Ucha Oernant) moved labourer Edward Hughes (44), his wife Ann (39) and their children John (16), Thomas (14), Elizabeth (12), Catherine (9), William (8) and Rice (6). However, the Hugheses did not stay long. Moving up from labourer, Edward moved his family to Maesrychen Bach to become a farmer of 12 acres. He must have had some success as he was still there ten years later.



*Oernant Uchaf was outlined as part of the 1832 conveyance.*

It is hard to identify Oernant Uchaf with certainty in the 1861 Census, but by 1871, thirty four year old labourer Robert Williams had moved into Tŷ Ucha Oernant with his wife Elizabeth and their two children Robert (4) and Elizabeth (2). To add to the confusion widow Elizabeth Davies was also living at Tŷ Ucha Oernant with her three children Henry (17), Hannah (9) and Robert (4). Again in 1881 it is difficult to distinguish Oernant Uchaf as there is no continuation of occupation and there are seven different properties just referred to as Oernant. By 1891 quarryman David Williams had taken up residence at Oernant Uchaf, with his wife Mary, and the couple would stay there for over thirty years. Whilst there they had nine children – Elizabeth, Jennie, Margaret, Mary, Edwin, Edith, Blodwen,



*The grave at Llantysilio Church. In loving memory of MARY WILLIAMS Oernant Ucha, Pentredŵr, died January 18th 1925 aged 63 years. Also of DAVID WILLIAMS husband of the above died March 17th 1936 aged 77 years.*

Edward and Myfanwy. In 1925 Mary passed away, but David continued to live at Oernant Uchaf until he too died in 1936. He and Mary were buried together in Llantysilio Churchyard.

Roadman Ivor Jones was the next occupant of the house, together with his wife Blodwen, their two children Winifred and Peter and Ivor's father John. Ivor had grown up North End Cottage in Pentredŵr village and had married Blodwen from the Geraint in Llangollen in 1924, going on to have Winifred in 1925 and Peter in 1933.

In the early 1950s Oernant Uchaf became the home of Henry and Margaret Drakeley. They had moved up from Oernant Isaf, where they had farmed for twenty years, to enjoy their retirement. Sadly Margaret died early in 1956. The year after Margaret died the Tottenham Estate sold off many of their properties in the area.



*A snow bound Oernant Uchaf.*



*Henry and Margaret Drakeley's gravestone.*

Henry was given first refusal on Oernant Uchaf and purchased it for £185. Unfortunately Henry too passed away four years later in 1961, and was buried alongside Margaret in Llantysilio Churchyard.

Following his death Oernant Uchaf was sold by Henry's

executors to Francis Wilson Featherstone of Conway, for £300. Four years later he in turn sold the house to Derek James and Jean Griffith from Deganwy for the increased amount of £750. Possibly they planned to have it as a second home, as, in 1966, when they sold it to James Henry and Edith Mary Stephens for £850, they were still living at the same address in Deganwy. James and Edith were also from Deganwy so possibly the two couples knew each other. Although they too only owned the house for a



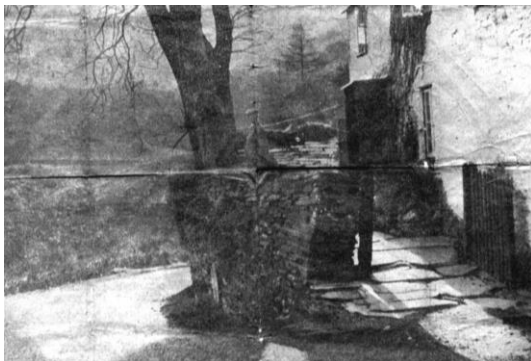
*Oernant Uchaf was advertised for sale in late 1965.*

*Liverpool Daily Post (Welsh Edition) - 30 October 1965.*

year, during that time James and Edith renamed the house Green Pastures Cottage. In 1967 Oernant Uchaf (or Green Pastures Cottage) changed hands again when Thomas and Lily Hignett from Liverpool paid £975 to purchase it from the Stephenses. They bought the cottage as an investment to rent out to holiday makers. Thomas died just three years later, but Lily remained in the house for another six years. It was during this period in the life of Oernant Uchaf that there was a fire. One day the holiday makers had left a fire burning in the grate and it had set light to the beam above the fireplace. The entire upper floor of the cottage was gutted.

Possibly as a result of the fire Lily decided to sell Oernant Uchaf, and in 1976 it was bought by Ron and Nicky Davies. In fact, the house was purchased just by Nicky, but under her real name of Pauline Wood. Nicky and Ron stayed for just four years before moving over the mountain to Llandynan.

Oernant Uchaf became home to Dianne and Robin Arnold, both teachers. Dianne recalls their time at the cottage:- We moved into Oernant Uchaf in May 1980. The property was built into the hillside. It had two staircases and although the ground floor rooms were interconnected the first floor rooms were not. There was a glass skylight above the main



*A picture from an old newspaper clipping, when the main entrance was at the front of Oernant Uchaf.*

staircase and I'm told sheep would walk across! The house had no central heating, it was single glazed and water was gravity fed from a spring.

We dug out around the whole of the property to help with issues of damp and to give more outside space. Inside walls were knocked through and reconfigured upstairs to connect the rooms and the bathroom moved to a room on a lower level to give three bedrooms. The kitchen was moved from a small room on the south side of the property to a larger one and an outside doorway was made where there had been a window. Central heating and double glazing followed. A large JCB levelled out a lawn/terrace area outside and many plants added.

Given the location and age of the house there were obvious ongoing challenges. Sheep persisted on getting into the garden and eating my flowers, water pipes would freeze in winter often for days on end (the investment in a borehole was worth every penny!) and forward planning for food supplies was essential for times when, as a family, we were snowed in. There was more than one occasion when we, Michael Bird Jones snr from Bron Haul and Andrew Corker from Tŷ Issa trudged through deep snow drifts to The Britannia to collect milk and bread which had been delivered there for us.

I feel grateful to have been custodian of Oernant Uchaf for 36 years. It was such a privilege and adventure to live in such a unique location. The youngest of my three boys was born in that house and my middle son was the last baby to be born in Llangollen Cottage Hospital.



The next custodians of Oernant Uchaf were David and Lesley Yelland. After purchasing Oernant Uchaf in July of 2016 there were considerable repairs required before we could move in. These were mainly associated with damp, both rising and penetrating. Before any work on the inside / main body of the house was undertaken there was an issue that had been evident from the first day we saw the property. To the rear of the property there is a good quality garden shed. It is sited in a corner location which follows the outline of the building. Over the years, between the shed and house, one 8 tonne skip worth of mud and flora had accumulated and was clearly doing no good to the walls of the house.

After just a few days clearing, in order to access the area, we ordered an 8 tonne skip and proceeded to fill it with the contents of the trench. At the same time it became evident that professional assistance would be required to address some of the damp work required in the body of the house. A local contractor was found and work began almost immediately. The main activities required, on the inside of the house, were all related to the rising damp from which many buildings of this age and construction suffer.



*One of the original floor slabs re-used to make a garden path.*

When these buildings were built the damp proofing consisted of large (in our case 2' by 3' by 4') slabs of slate placed directly on the soil. These would be used as both the support for the walls and in the open floor spaces. Over time these can deteriorate and allow groundwater to rise into the living spaces. The worst of the damp was in the living room, where the fireplace is, and so that was the first location where the floor was removed. In opening up the floor we found that many of the slates had deteriorated

badly but a few were still strong enough to be re-used so many of them were cut into internal window sills. This means that almost all the internal window sills in the property now have slates cut down from these large 'flag' stones. The action of selecting and cutting them down left us with several stones that could be used for the path at the front of the house and other material of little use.

Once the floor had been relaid we proceeded to remove the damaged plaster/internal render from the walls. It became evident quite quickly that much of the plaster had 'blown', detached itself from the underlying wall, through the natural movement of the stone. After removing all the plaster in this room we found that the end room was also suffering with the same issue so that was removed as well. At this point it was clear that, though the walls were still structurally sound there was a considerable volume of



*Plaster removed from the interior walls.*

water/damp still in them. In order to allow the walls to dry we applied a breathable membrane. This has been extremely successful and no sign of damp is evident seven years later.

After all the work on the inside of the house was completed it was evident that the render on the outside of the house needed attention. After finding a specialist team in lime rendering we proceeded to remove 90% of the render from the building. Sadly we were too busy to take photos of this but it is reasonable to say that several interesting aspects arose during this process. One interesting development was that in removing the render from the front of the building it became clear that when the buildings were originally constructed there had been a gap of around 2 inches (50mm) between the section that is now the kitchen and the remainder of the house. This ran from the ground to the eaves. The team rebuilt this part of the wall and tied the two walls together. In addition, when removing the render from the wall next to the aforementioned shed an old window opening was uncovered and rebuilt.

As part of the external work it was clear from very early on that drainage around the building was a priority. As the other works proceeded a drainage channel was built that now protects the building from 3 sides, the other side of which drains very well into a channel that runs under the front wall. To ensure the drainage works were as effective as possible all the roof was checked, and repaired as necessary, and the guttering was replaced all round. We moved in just as most of the work was drawing to a close. Living in the house showed that there were other areas that needed addressing but were perfectly acceptable for normal daily use.

The next big project was the elimination of the bracken from the land. There are many reasons to reduce/remove invasive species but what made the necessity even clearer was that after performing my first removal session from the hill to the right as you exit the garden gate, was the requirement to remove 47 ticks that had attached themselves to me! This occurred when the bracken was in full development during May/June of 2017. After consulting several sources, including the Bracken Management team at Bangor University, it was clear that, given the lay of the land and the available resources, me, the only practical approach was to manually remove the bracken. This involved, and continues to require, many sessions walking over the ground inspecting for the rising crosiers. I have tried to use mechanical strimmers and even a mowing machine but the most effective approach is manual removal. There are 2 aspects to this. Firstly, there is the identification and removal of the new crosiers from April through to September. Also, as much of the land has long been left to the bracken, the buildup of bracken litter means that for the several reasons, including allowing the ground to be available to other species and allowing safe movement around the land, the litter must be removed. In more recent years this has become an even greater necessity as the buildup of litter can be a fire risk.

This was the state of the bracken when we purchased the property in 2016.



*View looking up the first hill in 2016.*

*View looking down the first hill in 2016.*

This project is, other than the replacement activities performed during the removal, our key maintenance activity with regard to the land. Our ultimate goal is to remove all of the bracken from our fields and maintain it in this way. So far we have removed bracken from over 70 percent of the land. A new area is targeted every year and, hopefully, in the next 5 years we will be free of all established bracken growth. In addition to the development of wild flowers, seeded by us, together with grass, to

replace the bracken, we have seen the extraordinary growth of hazel trees. Previously there were fewer than 10 older trees, both at the top and the bottom of our fields but since the bracken has been removed we now have over 150 different hazel trees.

The current state of the same land can be seen below, at the same period of the year though the weather has been much drier than normal;



*View looking up the first hill in 2023.*



*View looking down the first hill in 2023.*

We have made a few small improvements to the garden area, with the removal of the old gardening shed and its replacement with a more substantial summer house.

During our time at the property we have had several 'finds' mostly as the consequence of moving quantities of soil. These include an intact small sauce bottle from the 1950s and what appears to be a tool used for building railway lines.

It should be said that the occasional issues with the road, assisting at the odd traffic accident could not in any measure reduce the sense of what a privilege it is to enjoy living in this house and with the lasting hope that those who come after us will be prepared to put the work in to ensure our achievements are not lost.



*A hay cutting implement found when we were carrying out some work outside the house.*

*By: David and Lesley Yelland, Owners of Oernant Uchaf, Horseshoe Pass from July 2016, Dianne Mather and David Crane.*