

**DISCOVERING OLD WELSH HOUSES: revised Trustees' Welcome Pack.**  
**To be discussed, modified & agree by the trustees on 24<sup>th</sup> May & recommended to the**  
**22 June 2022 AGM**

**INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCOVERING OLD WELSH HOUSES GROUP**

This project grew from the enthusiasm of a handful of members of the small Cymdeithas Hanes Beddgelert History Society in the heart of Snowdonia into a project involving hundreds of people across north Wales.

Between 2000 and 2004 a volunteer-led archaeological excavation of a ruined sixteenth century farmhouse was undertaken in the Nantgwynant valley at the foot of Snowdon. Local written and oral history indicated that timbers from this ruin had been re-used in a nearby farm building. The excavation leader attended a Vernacular Architecture Group conference in Harlech in 2005 and heard about dendrochronology (tree-ring dating of old timbers) and the idea of dating these re-used timbers to date the excavated ruin was born. Dr Nigel Nayling, University of Wales Trinity & St David, agreed to undertake assessments and sampling of this re-used timber, and of original timbers in three neighbouring farmhouses, paid for with a small community grant from the Snowdonia National Park. Felling dates of 1508 and the 1550s were obtained from two of the farmhouses.

This whetted the interest of the local Cymdeithas Hanes Beddgelert History Society, and thus the **Snowdonia Dendrochronology Project** was established. From 2004-2007 this group worked in partnership with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) visiting and assessing over 60 old houses within a 10 mile radius of Beddgelert in Snowdonia. These had been identified using the RCAHMW Inventories for Caernarvonshire, Cadw listed building schedules and local knowledge. The Project was carefully explained to and written permission received from house owners and tenants who later received copies of all results.

The Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory was contracted to sample suitable original oak timbers. Grants were obtained and funding allowed 28 buildings to be sampled; felling dates were obtained for 26 of them. The earliest was a small singled storied cruck farmhouse of 1495 with a later gable-end fireplace. Another single storied cruck building dated 1508 had a central hearth prior to the insertion a generation later of a lobby-entry central fireplace. Fifteen buildings dated to the 1500s of which thirteen had gable-end fireplaces and six still contained spiral stone stairs in the gable-end wall. A church screen dated to the early 1500s. Six buildings were dated to the 1600s, and four to the 1700s, several being the dates for a later phase of an earlier un-dateable building. Most of the felling dates suggested a considerably earlier date for buildings than previously thought, some being as much as two centuries earlier.

No architectural recording was undertaken as this had generally been included in the 1950s preparation of the RCAHMW Inventories for Caernarvonshire. A small number of volunteers researched the histories of these dated houses and their families in varying amounts of detail depending on the documents and time available. A bilingual leaflet "Tudor Buildings in Snowdonia" was produced and was freely distributed, and many talks were given about the results of this first Project. These results are now on [www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk](http://www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk), the project website.

By late 2008 interest had grown in this aspect of local history and the Welsh built heritage. In 2009 the **North West Wales Dendrochronology Project** was established as a Registered Charity, and had a bilingual constitution and policies documents which can be read on the website. The formally expressed objects of the charity were "to advance the education of the public in general (and

particularly amongst professional and amateur historians and archaeologists and local communities) on the subject of pre-1700 buildings in Wales, where possible using dendrochronology (tree ring dating); and to promote research into the history of such buildings by volunteers and specialists for the public benefit in all aspects of that subject; and to publish the useful results”.

### PROJECT AIMS

1. To identify, sample in order to **date original timber using dendrochronology**, undertake **architectural building recording** and **research the histories** of a selection of the Tudor/Elizabethan hall-houses, cruck and Snowdonia-style storeyed buildings and town houses across north-west Wales which have suitable original timber, in order to clarify the development of houses across the area.
2. To raise the awareness and involvement of **local communities** in the built heritage aspect of the Welsh culture of the region.
3. To **share the results** widely through major national (Wales & UK) publications down to local school and community groups, and thus, through increased knowledge and a better data-base, to safeguard these elements of our heritage for future generations of both local people and visitors.

**PROJECT OBJECTIVES.** During the first few years these were:

1. To offer training to any interested members of local communities to enable them to identify and research such buildings in their area.
2. To obtain written consent from owners of such buildings wishing to be involved in the Project.
3. To work in partnership with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) and other organisations across the area.
4. To raise finance through grants to fund the work
5. To contract the specialist sampling and dating work to an appropriate body.
6. To involve local architectural surveyors in producing materials to complement the local Heritage Environment Records & the RCAHMW archive, including a database of sampled structural components to enable a typological analysis of development to be available for further research.
7. To develop a website, photographic archive and artistic materials suitable for dissemination to a range of audiences. [[www.discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk](http://www.discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk)]
8. To work in partnership with primary schools with Gwynedd County Council & Cynnal to produce regional Welsh interactive digital learning materials for Key Stage 2: the Tudors.
9. To produce i) bilingual leaflets for each geographical area for local people and visitors, ii) a full report online through our website and other UK / Wales wide websites such as *Archwilio & Coflein*; iii) a book “Discovering Historic Homes in North West Wales” to be jointly published with the RCAHMW in 2014, and iv) a series of illustrated talks, guided visits and exhibitions to share the results.

From the outset **community involvement** was a key aspect of the project. Bilingual fliers and posters inviting volunteers were widely distributed in libraries, record offices & shops; press releases and local radio also spread the invitations. Many illustrated talks were given to a wide range of community organisations across north-west Wales. All this led to considerable interest from individuals from many backgrounds. Induction / introductory training days were arranged in each of the county record offices; during the morning the project aims and procedures were discussed and policies explained. The afternoon was run by local archivists as a workshop outlining how volunteers could research the history of a house and its families using documentary resources. Those interested in participating signed up to the project volunteering policy which included the responsibilities of both the project and the volunteer. These days were repeated each year in each area as new volunteers joined.

Meanwhile, **grants** were sought from a wide range of county, pan-Wales and UK-based organisations to assist with differing aspects of the project in each county. Of these applications around one third to one half were successful. These are shown later under “Finance”. Most grants

allowed the volunteers' time, supporters' free accommodation for meetings and supporters' free tuition to count as part of the match funding. This required detailed recording including each volunteer maintaining a worksheet of time spent on the project which was forwarded to the local authority grant – aiding bodies.

The tree-ring dating (**dendrochronology**) assessing and sampling work was put out to tender in phases jointly with the RCAHMW; the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory won the contracts. Dr Dan Miles and his colleagues visited on numerous occasions, usually for several days at a time, to inspect and sample the many remote buildings which were thought to contain substantial original pre-1700 oak timbers. Their visits seemed to coincide with floods, snow or wild weather, and houses were initially referred to by their distinctive features as the Welsh names were found difficult to pronounce. Reports frequently had to be completed in haste to meet the funders' deadlines, but this was always achieved.

**Architectural building recording** was undertaken by six organisations/individuals working to an agreed brief at specified houses. Everyone worked hard to produce excellent reports to meet tight deadlines. There was insufficient finance to record every house dated using dendrochronology, and a very few un-dateable houses were recorded.

## **MANAGEMENT**

The project was managed by twelve Trustees operating through an Executive Committee with Officers, and meeting at least quarterly. A larger Advisory Group mainly consisting of professional architects, archaeologists, archivists, academics, and building conservation officers met at least quarterly to offer advice and support. In addition, members of these two groups formed four committees to oversee the IT / website, education, publications and policies aspects. The project would not have been as successful without all their endeavours. The AGM was followed by a public lecture which usually attracted 80 -100 people, the venue changing each year. Quarterly bilingual newsletters were freely distributed to libraries & record offices as well as to all volunteers and other interested people. A Friends' Group was established and monthly events of talks, walks and guided house visits were arranged. Bilingual leaflets highlighting the characteristics of early houses in six areas were produced and freely distributed.

## **HOUSE HISTORY RESEARCH**

Complimentary to the work of the professional dendrochronologists and architectural building recorders, a team of around 200 volunteers have been researching the documentary history of the selected houses and their families. Most volunteers had never undertaken this type of research before. Many were retired, some were owners of the houses involved and several had always wanted to do something like this but did not know how to start.

Following the area induction days, monthly meetings were established in six locations to support their research. These were led by the project director and included sessions in record offices on using types of documents, on guided house visits to provide first-hand experience and sessions for discussion and individual help. These were hosted by owners of early houses or in convenient local venues. Suggested formats and outlines were distributed and the dreaded worksheet was collected each month. Volunteers could do as much or as little as they wished or had time for. Some volunteers soon decided it was not what they had anticipated, or their circumstances altered, and they left. However new volunteers kept joining as they heard about the project. Many have continued for several years and have become experts in aspects of local history, building architecture and/or documentary research.

All research was collated following a strict pattern of typed-up notes moving forward in time and recording for each item the date, the information and the full reference of where the information was found. This included material from books, manuscripts, maps, rentals, wills, taxes and living memories. The purpose of the strict format was to ensure that future readers could refer to each

source and maybe, with increased knowledge, interpret it in an alternative way. Unreferenced antiquarian writings proved most frustrating! All reports are available in the website [www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk](http://www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk), as well as on Coflein, Archwilio and the HERs at the Welsh Archaeological Trusts. Additions and corrections are added to the project website.

**NEW NAME & WIDER FOCUS:** The North West Wales Dendrochronology Project officially concluded on 31 March 2012. The following day the “**Dating Old Welsh Houses Group**” was established under the original registered charity number, with sixteen trustees, and eighteen months later had over 110 paid-up members. The Group continued to arrange monthly events and an annual residential Study Tour took place. Four branches were set up to encourage local research. There was a combined branch for Anglesey & Caernarfonshire, and branches in Conwy, Denbighshire and Merioneth. Each branch ran monthly meetings of talks, guided house visits & supported networking to develop their particular interests in house and landscape history. Additional early houses are being discovered and researched. The quarterly newsletter began to include a report from each branch in turn.

The findings of the previous projects provided new data which challenges earlier understanding of the chronological and spatial development of the use of styles and materials in houses across north Wales. The 2013-15 “**Targeted Research**” project and the 2014-15 and 2015-16 “**Conwy Partnership**” phases 1 & 2 enabled this work to continue. In 2015-16 grants were sought for a further “**Filling the Gaps**” programme of work to date, record and research targeted properties to answer some of these issues, particularly in south Merioneth & Denbighshire. The launch was held in December 2014 of a substantial much-praised bilingual book “**Discovering the Historic Houses of Snowdonia**”, prepared jointly by the RCAHMW and DOWH. This has since been reprinted.

**Revised STRATEGIC PLAN:** In summer 2015 the trustees reviewed the many aims achieved and activities undertaken over the last few years and revised the Group’s overall aim and strategic plan - the focus became the key areas of research, outreach and governance across North Wales.

**OVERALL AIM:** *"Celebrating Welsh heritage through the study of traditional houses and the lives of the people who lived in them"*

**RESEARCH** will develop, with others, a framework to guide research & projects, fund raising & training, underpinned and enhanced by databases.

**OUTREACH** includes developing communications through public relations, website, publications, membership, branches, events, newsletters & study tours.

**GOVERNANCE** covers the role of trustees, administration and finance.

**FINAL NAME CHANGE:** On 1 January 2016 “**Dating Old Welsh Houses Group**” changed its name to “**Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group**” as the Trustees considered that ‘discovering’ better reflected our objects and what the Group and Branches undertake. Between 2016 and 2019 the focus of DOWH research moved towards **North East Wales**, an area not previously included. A three-year project concentrated mainly on Flintshire & Wrexham, particularly the Clwydian Range & Vale of Llangollen AONB and was supported by numerous grants. Caernarfonshire, Denbighshire and Conwy branches separately obtained grants from the **Tesco “Bags of Help” Community Fund** to undertake local projects. Due to the Covid pandemic the last two have not yet been completed. In 2018 a successful UK-wide **Vernacular Architecture Group** Annual Summer Conference was organised by DOWH and hosted in Bangor University with three days of conducted visits to key houses across North Wales. Also in 2018, DOWH was Highly Commended at the finals of the **Heritage Angels Wales** in the **Best Heritage Research, Interpretation and Recording** category. In 2019- 20 a **translation into Welsh** was made of the important house history of Plas Penmynydd, grant-aided by the Isle of Anglesey County Council. Tree-ring dating, building recording and house history research continue at key newly discovered houses.

In 2019 it was decided to review the notes taken relating to houses visited since 2005 & prepare a searchable **Houses Database** to be better able to search our records and plan future activities. A specific grant was obtained and the work was completed by early 2022. It was also agreed to completely revise the **DOWH website** in-house; this has involved a huge amount of work and the website was successfully relaunched in December 2021. During early 2022 it is intended to review & update reports and include missing reports. Near the start of the Covid pandemic it was agreed to maintain / increase members' involvement by encouraging their contributions to an enlarged quarterly bilingual Newsletter and by also offering members an online monthly lecture, in English. These activities meant that DOWH has been very active during the pandemic. In early 2022 some branches are already re-starting activities with their members. DOWH is now reviewing the Strategic Plan and considering developments for the post-pandemic era.

Trustees can read the Annual Reports and Financial Statements sent following the AGM to the Charity Commission; these also give information about the current trustees.

Margaret Dunn  
31<sup>st</sup> March 2022