

Celebrating two decades of the Village Alive Trust



The Village Alive Trust may be unique amongst the United Kingdom's 500 or so Building Preservation Trusts. **Edward Holland** tells us more about how the Trust works with owners to secure the future of buildings at risk rather than acquire buildings on a revolving-fund basis or creating a portfolio of income producing properties.

St Teilo's Llanarth, Monmouthshire aerial view. The high cost of essential repairs led to the church's closure in 2013. The building was put up for sale in 2019. (All images with permission of the Village Alive Trust)

In the same way that the Covid pandemic inspired new ways of working and funding, so too did the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. Monmouthshire was one of the worst hit areas in the United Kingdom, creating devastating loss to its farming communities. In consequence, European Union regional funding was made available to support recovery and to mitigate the impact of the disease. In 2004 Rev. Dr. Jean Prosser had the vision and drive to see how this funding could create new opportunities for recovery through

the reuse of redundant, or at risk, rural buildings. Jean had already achieved the impossible by securing funding for the conservation of the Grade I listed St. Cadoc's Church, Llangattock Lingoed, which was threatened with closure – she went on to rescue further rural parishes churches.

The Village Alive Trust's story began with small projects including two pyramidal wellhouses near Cross Ash and the rescue of an 'exceptional-

ly rare' Grade II* listed cider farm at Cwm Farm. This latter building, dated 1754, has retained its 18th-century fittings, including cider mill, circular trough and millstone as well as a cider press with a wooden screw. Although the owner was passionate about preserving the heritage they did not have any funds for repair. We were able to provide that input and the preservation of the cider house remains a tribute to the Trust and to the then owner, the late Harvey Marks. In a county famed for its historic orchards it is wonderful that this building survives and continues to use local pears to make perry.

The first large project the Trust took on was the rescue of a barn and cider house at Great Trerhew, Llanvetherine. Dated 1696, the list description notes that it 'forms an unusually ambitious, complex, large-scale and symmetrically planned farm range'. Indeed, it remains the last barn of this quality in this area, still on a working farm and not converted to residential. Moreover, the cider mill is bigger than that at Cwm Farm. However, in 2005 the gable end was unstable and the roof was no longer keeping out the weather. Consequently, the investment needed was prohibitive to the owners and whilst the Grade II* listed barn was adjacent to their listed farmhouse there was little they could do but watch it fall into terminal decay. The Beavan family therefore welcomed the Trust's help in sourcing funding and managing repairs on the basis of a lease that allowed the Trust to facilitate public access and host festivals on certain days in the year. To do this we were supported by the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF). Following restoration, the barn became the venue for BBC television's first ever *Lambing Live* and is now used by Kate's Country School for cider making, lambing and sheep-shearing courses.

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In 2011, shortly after completing Great Trerhew Barn, the Trust was approached by White Castle Vineyard for help with their Grade II* listed cruck-framed barn. Croft Barn is an 'exceptionally rare example of a C16 cruck-framed barn with exceptionally fine carpentry' and had been on the Buildings at Risk Register for many years. Working with the owners Robb and Nicola Merchant and local conservation architect Stefan Horowskyj, the Trust set up a project under the title 'Wine and Heritage Alive' which set about



BOTTOM: Press in Cwm Cider House. The Grade II* listed complex includes a farmhouse, cider house and barn.

TOP: An 18th-century wellhouse, near Cross Ash, Monmouthshire. The building stored water for the New Inn opposite. The sculpture of Saint Christopher, patron saint of travellers, was made by Philip Chatfield (b.1958).



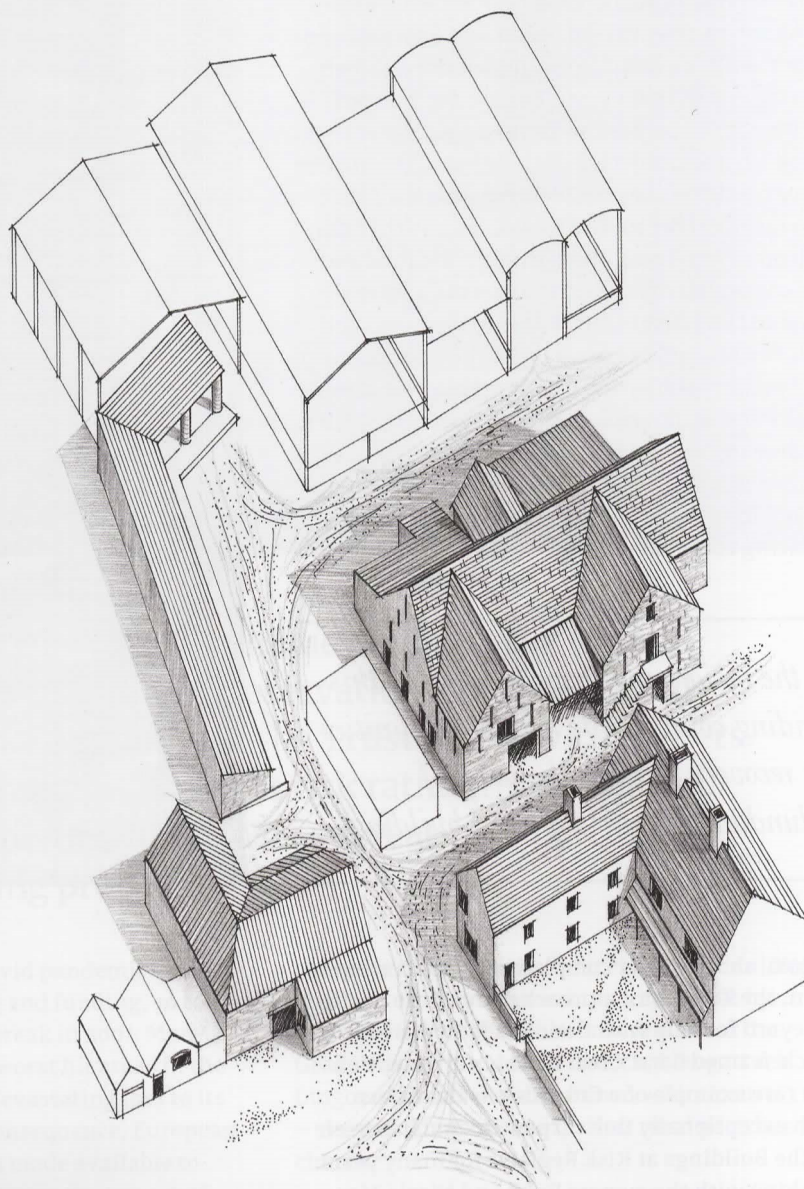
TOP: Barn at Great Trerhew Farm, Llanvetherine, Monmouthshire, after restoration.

BOTTOM: Axonometric drawing of the barn at Great Trerhew, drawn by Eric Evans.

retaining the historic character of the building and creating a viable long-term use. Work carried out included remaking and replacing missing wattle panels and repairing the roof structure (tree-ring sampling gave the timbers a felling date of 1581). The work was completed in 2015, and since then the barn has become a venue for receptions, courses and events and, in the first three years, over 500 people have benefited from hands-on learning here. The alternative for both these barns would have been continual decay or residential conversion resulting in significant change.

The Trust is committed to ensuring that St Teilo's can once again become an active place, providing a diverse range of local groups with a base and, in particular, somewhere that responds to mental health needs in the rural area.

It is important to remember that the Trust's work has not all been about leading building conservation projects in partnership with the owners. It has also involved promoting the rural heritage of Monmouthshire by creating heritage trails and leaflets, and through a grant scheme to reward those who have carried out exceptional building restoration or adaptive reuse projects. In 2011 the Trust was contracted by Monmouthshire County Council to act as its delivery agent for two grant schemes relating to the Monmouthshire Rural Development Plan – *Bringing Your Village Alive* and *Sense of Roots*. The former provided grants for projects that enhance the heritage and visual





TOP: Croft Barn, Whitecastle, Monmouthshire, exterior after restoration. The barn was originally part of the Great Trerhew estate.

BOTTOM: Croft Barn, interior after restoration. Dendrochronological dating of the timber was carried out, funded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales.

appeal of selected conservation areas. Examples included grants for the cost of exterior refurbishment of a prominent building on the main street in Monmouth and for the repair of two church spires using traditional materials. This latter scheme provided grants for projects that bring life to Monmouthshire's heritage including oral history, trails and interpretation, such as at Nelson Garden in Monmouth, and the Usk Rural Life Museum. In 2017 the Trust, supported by the Council, embarked on a programme, entitled 'Stop the Rot'. We gave informal advice on rescuing buildings at risk, of which the county has over 170, and held a free conference to bring together conservation experts and owners of some of these buildings.

Through all this work the Village Alive Trust has gained a reliable track record with the Heritage Lottery Fund, Architectural Heritage Fund, Cadw and Monmouthshire County Council as well as with the local community. In 2008 and 2013 we won the Rural Wales Award from the council for the Protection of Rural Wales.

This year the Trust celebrates its 20th anniversary and is led by our consummate chair, Pat Griffiths. We are currently working on St Teilo's Church, Llanarth, the most challenging of all our projects and the first in which we may need to take ownership, at least for a period. The church is Grade II* listed and sits in a raised medieval churchyard with a prominent tower. It closed in 2013 and was declared redundant in 2019 when the Church in Wales put it up for sale. A residential conversion was the most likely outcome, yet the Trust could see the potential for a community hub serving the rural area. In 2020, with a Project Viability Grant from the AHF, we completed a report to assess the potential for a range of uses. We are now fortunate to have an AHF Project Development Grant to fund a more detailed assessment by the community enterprise con-



sultant, Gareth Kiddie. The church is a landmark at the heart of the community and the conservation area. The Trust is committed to ensuring that it can once again become an active place, providing a diverse range of local groups with a base and, in particular, somewhere that responds to mental health needs in the rural area. We are grateful to the Church in Wales for giving us the time to develop this project and source the necessary funding.

Meanwhile, the threat to our traditional rural buildings, on which the Trust has spent most of two decades, remains as urgent as ever and there is still work to do.

More on the work of the Trust can be found at www.villagealivetrust.org.uk