

Llwyn-on Isaf

Llwyn-on Isaf is the name of a house dated 1689 that Birmingham IVC leased from a local sheep farmer from 1957 to 1993. It was variously called: Llwyn-on, The Farmhouse, The Cottage, The Hut.

Legend has it that a group of members were hill-walking above Barmouth and was looking out for a building suitable to use as a "hut" for IVC. They spotted one and when they saw a farmer they enquired about it but were told he knew it wouldn't be available. Just as they were about to walk away, he had an idea – he said he had a semi-derelict house that they could consider.

Llwyn-on is in Snowdonia, two miles from Barmouth (Abermaw, LL42 1DX), 650ft above the Mawddach estuary, a quarter of a mile walk down a steep, uneven, sometimes wet, path from the nearest minor road (the one past Panorama Walk). All supplies and luggage had to be carried down.

www.streetmap.co.uk/map.srf?X=263050&Y=317750&A=Y&Z=115

Llwyn-on Isaf is built in the typical thick dry-stone wall style of the area; it had superb views over the estuary and Cader Idris.

The first five year lease was signed in 1960 and IVC started making it habitable. In the early years IVC felt the tenancy was insecure so didn't do too many improvements, and kept a lookout for an alternative. The lease was, however, repeatedly renewed, (as IVC wasn't then a limited company it was signed by members who acted as Trustee Guarantors). Several times there were discussions about buying Llwyn-on Isaf: but each time one side or the other pulled out.

Bunk-beds and a paraffin cooker were installed. Initially there was no plumbed water (it came from a near-by small stream where people washed), no electricity (lighting was by Tilley and Kelly paraffin lamps) and the one toilet was a chemical closet 20 yards away.

Downstairs there was: a lounge with inglenook fire and store rooms off; a dining-room, which could sit 30 on benches at a tight squeeze with serving hatches from a small kitchen. On the first floor (normally the ladies floor) there were

two rooms with bunk beds for six and one for four. The top floor (attic with exposed beams) had two rooms with bunks for two, and one with six single beds. About 50 yards away was an old barn with bunks for ten on the first floor and storage below (traditionally men-only but later on it was mixed). This is a total of 36 beds; they were metal-framed with horse-hair, later foam, mattresses (they were rarely all occupied). Some chose to camp, for a small fee.

The landlord, Hughie Jones and his wife, Mary, lived in a small, even older, cottage near where we parked our cars: they liked chatting to members (they had no children). By the mid 1960's relations with Hughie were friendly: leading IVC to feel it worthwhile to make improvements for the longer term.

By 1972, when I started going to Llwyn-on, the water system had been enhanced – a gravity system with water collection, sand pre-filter system, storage tanks for about 100 gallons, and water plumbed into the kitchen and toilet . (Drainage of the fields in the hills above meant they no-longer acted as a slow-release sponge: so the stream dried up in some summers, notably in 1976). It was necessary to check on arrival that the water intake was working, there was water in the tanks, the pipes weren't frozen and a sheep hadn't disconnected a hose (people frequently failed to do these checks and the taps ran dry). In dry conditions water had to be severely conserved (yet some wasted it: such as by leaving the tap running whilst cleaning their teeth).

By 1972 there were also bottled-gas cookers and a flushing toilet (called Flo), pits had been dug for effluent. There was a drum incinerator down the field for burnables and tins (which were left in a big heap to rust away).

Later improvements made were: gas lighting downstairs, a second flush toilet (in a garden shed next to the stone-built original, called Flo2). A silver filter was installed for drinking water and a small washroom was built on the landing. In 1984 electricity was installed: this allowed electric lighting, a fridge, water boiler, personal electrical equipment and power tools.

In the 1980s a farmer kept pigs in a nearby field – which he liked us to feed food waste to.

Llwyn-onn Isaf was administered by a sub-committee of about 12 whose chairman was called the Warden and was on the main IVC committee (I was on the committee for nineteen years, as Warden 1975 – 77). This sub-committee met monthly in members' houses - it had positions such as: secretary, bookings, supplies, water, treasurer (having its own account), publicity, walks, safety. We had an account with a local hardware shop so anybody could get supplies: such as re-filled 30lb gas bottles.

When I joined cooking was done individually or in small groups (as per YHA): difficult with very limited kitchen space. I introduced communal meals, (as we still have on hostel weekends).

Most people went after work on a Friday, often meeting on the way for a meal in The Raven or The Vaults in Welshpool. In winter the first to arrive found the house cold: the only heating was one open fire which took a long time to light and have any effect (sometimes previous occupants hadn't collected and left sufficient dry wood, also a cold chimney didn't draw well so there was lots of smoke). The thick stone walls absorbed much heat and ran with moisture from condensation. After a few days the downstairs had warmed up: but then it was time to go home.

People went walking, sightseeing, went to the beach at Tally-Bont in summer, just relaxed looking at the view, and, of course, to pubs (Cors-y Gedol, Last, Plas, George III: until 1976 all pubs were closed on Sundays). From 1960 to 1975 a sailing boat was kept at Barmouth for members' use: initially a Falcon GP14, then an Albacore (which was disposed of after a couple of incidences involving inexperienced sailors in strong tidal waters).

A logbook was kept which, amongst other things, listed the people who stayed (I have most of them from 1972).

On average there were about 2000 bednights per year, initially about 2/3 BIVC the others AIVC and other clubs, later only 1/3 were BIVC. It was occupied most weekends, especially in summer. Members could go without notice, once they'd checked it wasn't fully booked. Some teachers spent much of the summer holiday there in a family-like group.

Over the years the cost of a bednight for a BIVC member was about £3 in today's money.

By 1990 The Farmhouse was still popular, but we were struggling to keep up with the standard of accommodation that people wanted. Fewer members were prepared to help maintain it (when it was acquired most members lived with their parents, by the 1990's they had their own house to look after).

After Hughie died in 1981 Mary became the landlord and moved down into Barmouth. We were negotiating its purchase in 1987 when Mary died suddenly. Her estate was divided up and her nephew, Clive Deardon, got Llwyn-on Isaf and wanted to move in himself. When he gave us notice to quit legal negotiations commenced (we were sitting commercial tenants). Eventually we settled to leave in October 1993, with about £2000 compensation for our improvements and loss of lease. During this period Llwyn-on was listed by Cadw (Welsh equivalent to English Heritage).

We had a last-week work-party to clear the house, using a borrowed Land-Rover and trailer to take everything that wouldn't burn up the track to the road. Some contents were taken for use in IVC's Birmingham premises, others were sold by sealed-bid auction, the rest went into skips on the road. I was the one honoured to ceremoniously lock the door for the last time. I had mixed emotions - personally I felt it was best that we left when we did as the burden of maintenance fell on fewer and fewer members.

Mr Deardon surfaced the track, did up Llwyn-on Isaf and moved in with his family. Some members, whilst walking on the nearby public footpath, have been invited in and shown round - they reported that the Deardens had done up the house nicely (but it is reported that the surrounding fields have been neglected, invasive plants introduced and the view is now obscured by trees).

Many people have very fond memories of Llwyn-on Isaf and many long-term relationships and friendships were started there.

John Pitcock