

# A TALE OF TWO DECADES

As a student, architect Johnny Holland began the ambitious project of restoring this traditional Welsh farmhouse, and over 20 years on, his love for it has not waned

FEATURE ANNABEL FREYBERG PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON UPTON

As a young boy, Johnny Holland and his two brothers used to spend many of their summers running around the woods close to the family cottage in North Wales, making dens and bonfires. They enjoyed playing at the derelict farmhouse of Garth Gell nearby, sneaking inside through a broken window. 'The house was abandoned in 1948,' Johnny explains, 'so it was the perfect playground for us.'

In 1989, while he was studying architectural history at university and becoming increasingly passionate about rural buildings, Johnny and his parents persuaded the local farmer in south Snowdonia to sell Garth Gell to him for £30,000. 'The property was built in 1805 as a tenant farmhouse for the estate, which was broken up in the early 20th century,' he explains. 'The house was constructed from slate-like Cambrian stone – the roughly dressed rectangular blocks were literally dug out of the fields around it – while the hand-cut roofing slates are unlikely to have travelled further than 20 miles. It's a blend of local vernacular and Georgian style, and has unusual octagonal chimney stacks that are a signature feature of the estate.'

Although the farmhouse had been abandoned for 40 years when Johnny took it on, its roof was largely intact, preserving the whole structure, from the oak rafters, joists and beams to the original wooden

**ABOVE RIGHT** Old stoneware jam jars in the kitchen were all picked up at junk shops

**RIGHT AND OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT** There is a Welsh settle down one side of the scrubbed pine farmhouse table in the kitchen; Jane says she is saving up for a genuine

Welsh dresser. To find similar rustic wooden furniture visit [celticpineandoak.co.uk](http://celticpineandoak.co.uk)

**OPPOSITE TOP LEFT** Johnny, Jane and their son Gabriel  
**OPPOSITE BELOW** Garth Gell nestles at the foot of the Rhinog Mountains in North Wales; it was built in 1805



## KEY FACTS

**Location** North Wales  
**Period** Farmhouse built in 1805  
**Size** Four bedrooms; 15 acres  
**Owners** Johnny Holland and his wife Jane Hackett own an architecture and interiors business; they have one child, Gabriel, and two Welsh Border Collies, Nell and Gwyn



floors upstairs and slate downstairs. 'If you can keep the hat on a building it doesn't deteriorate,' he says. 'But if just two or three slates go, a building that has stood for 200 or 300 years will rapidly fall apart – rot spreads like wildfire as soon as the weather gets in.'

His first task, then, was to make the farmhouse habitable. Professional builders replaced the sash windows and doors, and re-covered the roof in thick, local slate. Following those immediate repairs, the rest of the renovation and decoration was a 15-year labour of love. 'Things were done as and when I could afford them,' admits Johnny, who for years kept dairy products in the stream that runs through the garden. 'The water's always cold, even in summer.' Being in a remote area, the farmhouse never had mains electricity or water so he gave the property its first plumbing, some rudimentary electrical fittings and a generator. However, it is still not on the National Grid; and neither telephone nor television has ever entered the house.

Luckily for the tight budget, the first few summers spent working on the house cost very little, as Johnny roped in friends and family to help. But he decorated the entire house himself and devoted much of his time to lime plaster repairs, pointing with lime mortar and limewashing the interior. 'I did it the traditional farmhouse way so that it would last years, and allow the stone walls to breathe,' he says. He bought lime direct from a quarry in the form of unstable calcium oxide (quicklime); and in the front garden of Garth Gell, he would slake the lime by placing chunks in a

metal bucket (plastic would have melted) and adding water. This generated considerable heat, spluttering and bubbling as lime putty was created – enough to paint the entire house. 'I love the stuff,' he says. 'Several coats are required and the more layers you add, the more beautiful, soft, chalky and luminous the finish.'

After leaving university, Johnny worked for traditional paint guru Patrick Baty for a year, and learned 'a tremendous amount' about historic decorative schemes; he then continued his architectural studies. 'Working on this place has been a great way of putting all that experience into practice,' he says. 'And it has allowed me to try things out without having to worry about what the client would think.'

In the mid-1990s he met and fell in love with interior designer Jane Hackett; they set up their architecture and interiors business in London (hackettholland.co.uk) and continued to renovate Garth Gell together, furnishing it on a shoestring with items found by trawling junk shops, local auctions and house clearance sales. 'Jane has always been in awe of the place,' Johnny says. 'She teases that it's the reason she married me. The first time my mother >

**BELOW LEFT** The hallway has been given a coat of traditional limewash; the mounted antlers were found in a junk shop

**BELOW RIGHT** Johnny put in the wide tongue-and-groove panelling (painted Ringwold Ground by Farrow & Ball) in the snug

RENOVATION TIMELINE

- **Spring 1989** Bought property
- **Spring 1990** Re-roofed main house
- **Summer 1990** Replaced windows and doors
- **Autumn 1990** Installed water supply (from hill)
- **Summer 1991** Limewashed interior; repointed lime mortar
- **Winter 1993** Fitted Aga
- **Summer 1995** Built permanent kitchen
- **Winter 1998** Fixed wood-burning stove
- **Summer 2001** Commissioned four-poster bed and other joinery
- **Autumn 2004** Opened up the blank window at the front of the house to make a 'stable door'
- **2005-2006** Converted hayloft



**FAR LEFT** The old slate floors were scrubbed by hand and sealed with linseed oil and turpentine; furniture was bought at junk and antiques shops – try pinesolutions.co.uk for new alternatives

**LEFT** Johnny replaced some of the spindles and treads on the original staircase, and hand-aged the timber himself

**BELOW** There are fireplaces in the principal rooms, but just one inglenook in the sitting room. Roger Oates sells similar fabrics



*'Being in a remote area, the house never had mains electricity or water'*



FEATURE: ANNABEL FREYBERG/THE INTERIOR ARCHIVE; PHOTOGRAPHS: SIMON LIPTON/THE INTERIOR ARCHIVE



**ABOVE** The modern four-poster bed in the master bedroom was designed by Johnny and built by local joiner Ian Willis, who sourced the oak from Powis Castle Estate Sawmill

**RIGHT** Johnny put in narrow sash windows in the kitchen to frame views of the mountains

**FAR RIGHT** The bath was bought cheaply on eBay and re-enamelled; Jane painted the outside



**JOHNNY SHARES HIS EXPERT ADVICE**

'Do your archaeological research – find out as much as possible about the history of the building and the techniques and materials with which it was built. It's too easy to get rid of features because you don't know what they're for; greater knowledge will help you make the right decisions about the restoration.

'Don't rip anything out unless it is on its last legs – I regret pulling out some of the ground-floor lathe-and-plaster ceilings that sagged in places but could have been partly saved.'



*'The house is a venue for special occasions as well as a retreat from the city'*

met her, Jane was standing on the apex of the roof with a flue liner in her hands – and no scaffolding.'

Over the years, the house has continued to be a venue for special occasions, as well as a retreat from the city: Jane and Johnny were married at a chapel nearby in 2003 and held their wedding celebrations in the garden. 'We'll never forget the trail of guests in morning coats and wellies winding up the hill,' says Jane. Johnny and Jane also hosted many New Year's Eve parties over the years before their son Gabriel was born. 'We'd roast half a lamb, then eat, drink and talk by candlelight – there was nothing else to do,' says Jane, 'but with good company you don't miss the mod cons.'

In the same way they tried to approach the renovation of the house, Johnny made equally gentle repairs to the outbuildings, and even resisted turning the attached stables to domestic use for over a decade. 'I dislike the propensity to convert every possible building, which is wiping out our agricultural heritage,' he explains. 'But as we were spending more and more time in Wales away from London, we needed to be

able to accommodate friends comfortably.' So they turned the hayloft above the 100-year-old stable into a bedroom and bathroom, and connected it to the main house with a new staircase. 'However, the stables below have been conserved and retained,' says Jane. 'The cobbled floor, the original stalls and old farm implements were just too beautiful to lose.'

While there still may not be the usual everyday appliances at the house, there are open fires in most rooms, though one of Johnny's few regrets is rushing to install an Aga before he had fully considered heating the house. 'A solid fuel Rayburn might have been easier to run,' he admits, 'and more suited to deal with the complex hot water demands; but working on this place has been a learning curve.'

Although Johnny may wish to turn back the clock and make a few small changes to the way he tackled the renovation in the early days, the improvements to this old stone farmhouse have certainly ensured that this beautifully rustic building will remain standing and enjoyed for many years to come. ➔

**ABOVE LEFT** The hayloft bathroom has wood-paneled walls painted in Slipper Satin by Farrow & Ball

**ABOVE RIGHT** The guest bedroom in the old hayloft is simple but cosy