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Autor: [s.n.]
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The oldest surviving wooden house in Europe

It is the summer of 1287 in Schwyz, four years before activists in this region signed the Federal Charter, the country's founding document.

A well-to-do local family is in the middle of building a fine two-storey wooden house. They've already cut the timber from the local forest and they are helping the master carpenters assemble their dream home.

They are proud of their comfortable new dwelling with its modern blockhouse design and practical layout. The family, whose name we do not know, hope their house will last and be passed on to the next generation.

Amazingly the house still stands more than 700 years later, now a museum and the oldest surviving wooden house in Europe.

By some quirk of fate the House of Bethlehem survived the ravages of time, a fire which destroyed most of the village in the seventeenth century and the kind of wrangling that led to the even older Nideröst House (1176), just a stone's throw away, being dismantled and put into storage in 2001.

House of Bethlehem

Schwyz is a rural community where peace and continuity have blossomed into prosperity over many centuries. Bethlehem is one of a group of 12 ancient wooden houses in Schwyz. They may look like simple farmhouses from the outside but it was only the wealthy who could afford to build a structure as complicated and comfortable as this. The poor lived in much simpler shacks based on wooden posts that have long since disappeared.

The original occupants of Bethlehem may have been well off but they still had to work hard. They would have earned their living from farming, supplemented by mercenary service and administrative roles in the town.

Despite the small dimensions of the rooms and the low ceilings, people still choose to live in these ancient houses today and therein lies the secret of their longevity.

Bethlehem House was last occupied in the 1980s, divided into two apartments. As a museum it still gets the necessary upkeep and care.

Houses as old as this inevitably have had bits added and replaced over the centuries as new generations did their best to improve on the original.

Interior walls are added or taken away, a new floor is created over the open kitchen space, a lean-to is upgraded to an extension. The windows are usually the first to be changed, although even an untrained eye can find the originals with a little tip on what to look for.

Despite these modifications, if the mainframe, walls and supporting beams remain, the house can be dated back to the age of these original materials.

While Bethlehem, as old as Notre Dame in Paris, holds the age record for a wooden dwelling, much of the old housing stock in eastern Europe has yet to be dated, which means there may be competition out there.

Moving houses – not a new invention

Not only have the Schwyz houses been added to over the years, they may also have changed location more than once.

It was common practice in the Middle Ages and early modern times to dismantle houses and reassemble them on other sites. There were even entrepreneurs in the sixteenth century who made houses in one site to be sold and moved on.

Moving an existing house was cheaper and less time-consuming than building a new one, and some families brought their houses with them when they moved to work in a new area. Likewise, if an old house burned down, the owners might purchase another one and transport it to the original site.

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