



## Nesstofa on Seltjarnarnes



National Museum of Iceland  
Historic Buildings Collection  
The Medical History Museum of Iceland



Nesstofa (Nes House) was built in 1760–67 by the Danish colonial authorities on the initiative of Icelandic officials, who at that time were campaigning for efforts to be made to develop and diversify the Icelandic economy, and for the modernisation of building methods and materials to the country. Nesstofa was built as the official residence of Iceland's first Director of Public Health, Dr. Bjarni Pálsson. **A**

Nesstofa was designed by Danish court architect Jacob Fortling. **B** It is interesting to see how Danish and Icelandic architectural traditions are brought together in Nesstofa: Icelandic basalt rock is bound together using Danish lime, and the work was done by both Danes and Icelanders. The stonemasonry was supervised by Johan Georg Berger and Þorgrímur Þorláksson, and the timberwork by carpenter Adam Weinbrenner and cabinetmaker Ólafur Arngrímsson.



*Icelandic basalt with Danish lime mortar in window surround, upper floor.*



In addition, the dispensary was painted by Danish botanical illustrator Sören Johannes Helt in the winter of 1765. Icelandic homespun woollen cloth is used to caulk the wooden roofs, built of Danish timber, using Icelandic construction methods to build a roof of Danish form.

The oldest descriptions of the building are inspection reports of 1763 and 1767. The 1763 report indicates that the fabric of the building has been largely completed. The rooms are listed as follows: Vestibule, Kitchen, Bedroom, Examination Room, Room intended for Dispensary, Vestibule on western side, Laboratory and Drawing Room. The building also included a loft and cellar in an annex. The 1767

#### **A** Bjarni Pálsson, Director of Public Health

Director of Public Health Bjarni Pálsson (1719–99) completed his medical degree from the University of Copenhagen in 1759. During his years as a student, he had made research trips around Iceland with Eggert Ólafsson. On these travels, which took six summers, the two men visited almost every inhabited part of Iceland, scaled mountains and glaciers, and collected samples. In 1772 their *Travel Book* was published. This pioneering work still has value today as documentation of human life and nature in Iceland in the 18th century. A decree on the appointment of a Director of Public Health, issued in 1760 by the king of Denmark and Iceland, provides for an official residence to be built on one of the royal estates in south Iceland. The estate of Nes at Seltjörn was selected. Bjarni Pálsson served as Director of Public Health until his death. For almost all his career in office, he lived in Nesstofa with his wife Rannveig Skúladóttir and their children. Nesstofa was the official residence of the Director of Public Health until 1834.



## **B** The architect and architecture of Nesstofa

Jacob Fortling (1711–61) was born in Bayreuth, Germany, where he trained as a stonemason. In 1729 he went to Copenhagen, where he was employed as a stonemason on government building projects. He earned his master's certificate in 1741, and that same year he was appointed stonemason to the royal court. In the middle of the century Fortling started to design buildings, initially under the guidance of his mentor, court architect Laurids de Thurah, and later on his own account. In 1756 he was appointed royal builder, and then court architect in 1760. Fortling's best-known works are: his own home, Kastrupgård, and his factory in Amager; Holsteinspalæ on Stormgade in Copenhagen (an extension); and the director's residence at Rosenborg Palace

Fortling's last projects were the two Icelandic residences, Bessastaðastofa and Nesstofa. His designs were completed in the spring of 1761, a few months before he died. Nesstofa is indisputably Fortling's most sophisticated work. In the design he is said to have followed the model of the Apothecary's House on Bredegade in Copenhagen, a true masterpiece by de Thurah, completed in 1758. Nesstofa is a far more modest structure, entirely without ornament, under a typical Icelandic wooden roof. With its annex, with a cellar with two mortared vaults (the oldest in Iceland), Nesstofa is certainly unique among 18th-century stone buildings in Iceland, a consistent and aesthetically pleasing design.

When viewing Nesstofa today, certain far-from-obvious factors should be borne in mind. The building now stands alone, whereas it was originally built among a cluster of turf-and-timber farm buildings. It originally stood a little more aloof, with two steps up to the entrance. Iceland's old stone buildings were originally built with tarred wooden roofs, which proved inadequate in the wet and windy Icelandic climate, and soon began to leak. All of them but Nesstofa now have other roofing materials: tile, slate or copper. Thus Nesstofa, as restored by the National Museum, now gives the truest impression of the original appearance of the 18th-century stone buildings of Iceland.

*Under the chimney-breast in the laboratory on the ground floor.*



report indicates that most of the work unfinished in 1763 had been completed, but some final touches remained.

By a royal decree of 1774, the dispensing of medications was separated from the office of the Director of Public Health, and apothecary Björn Jónsson (1738–98) was allocated the western half of the Nesstofa building, together with half the estate of Nes.

In 1834 the office of Director of Public Health and the dispensary were transferred to the growing town of Reykjavík. After that time Nesstofa was privately owned, mostly as the home of the farmers of Nes.

### Architectural heritage – conservation and restoration

Nesstofa is now conserved as part of the National Museum of Iceland Historic Buildings Collection. Due to the unique significance of the building, the state acquired Nesstofa in 1976–9, at the urging of the National Museum. After research on the structure of the building, a policy was formulated on the restoration and conservation of Nesstofa. The building was to be restored as far as possible to its original form, with the emphasis on its historical and architectural value. Work commenced in 1980, when the exterior of the building was repaired, and the western half restored to its original form, together with the annex including cellar and loft. The first stage of restoration was completed in 1986, but the eastern part of the building remained in use as a dwelling until 1997. Major renovations recommenced in 2004. The eastern part of the ground floor and the entire upper floor were restored, and the finishing touches were made to the restoration of the exterior. In addi-

*Overlapping boards in the sloping ceiling of a room on the upper floor. Joints are sealed with homespun woollen cloth.*



tion, the surrounding area was improved. This large-scale restoration project was largely completed by 2008.

In the second stage of the restoration, the emphasis was on conservation and preservation of the oldest elements of the building, in order to conserve as far as possible the original form of the structure. This entailed multi-disciplinary collaboration among specialists in the fields of architectural conservation and preservation of heritage sites. The building will in the future primarily be a testimony to its own process of architectural development and restoration, while also being an important example of the *cut-stone period* in Icelandic architectural history. **C**

The costs of the first stage were met by the national Treasury, and additional funding was contributed by the Icelandic



*Restoration and renovation in the north rooms on the upper floor.*



### C Restoration and conservation of Nesstofa.

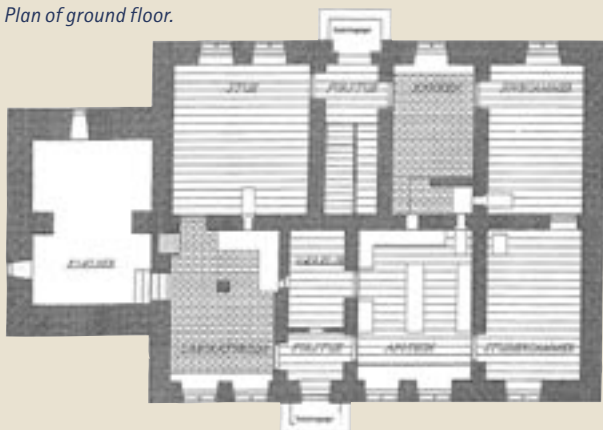
The restoration of Nesstofa was carried out in accord with the Venice Charter of 1964, whose principle is to “preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument.” Individual elements of the building have either been conserved or recreated on the basis of historical and architectural research, as witness the following enumeration: in the western half of the building, one partition wall was rebuilt from scratch, and in the eastern half two walls. The laboratory fireplace is a replica, while the kitchen hearth has been partly rebuilt. In the bedroom the pedestal of a stove has been recreated, in the dispensary lad’s room the stove-plate is preserved *in situ*, and in the drawing room traces of a warm air stove have been left visible. In the western half of the building all doors are old, though not original, while in the eastern half the doors are new. Fittings in the dispensary, kitchen and laboratory are all replicas. The same applies to the staircase to the upper floor. Such variations, including replicas, conserved objects and traces, serve to underline the historical value of the building in a diverse manner.

Medical Association, the Rotary movement and Professor Jón Steffensen, who was also a consultant on the renovation of the building and its interior fittings. For the latter stage of the project the National Museum has received generous funding from Augustinus Fonden in Denmark; the Ministry of Education and Culture also contributed, and the Seltjarnarnes town council met the cost of archaeological excavations and completion of the surrounding plot. The Medical Association once again collaborated with the Museum. The architect of the reconstruction was Þorsteinn Gunnarsson, who has been involved in the restoration of most of Iceland’s 18th-century stone buildings. Conservation and research on colour

Original double floorboards with  
varved clay in the cavity.



Plan of ground floor.



Plan of upper floor.





*Dispensary, ground floor.  
Restored according to  
description in an inspection  
report of 1767.*



traces was carried out in collaboration by conservators at the National Museum of Iceland and Nationalmuseet in Denmark. The work on the project was carried out by craftsmen who specialise in traditional skills and renovation of old buildings. Planning was handled by the Architectural Heritage Board, and project management was under the supervision of the Director of the National Museum.

### **Guided tour of Nesstofa – architectural heritage, original and renewal**

#### *Western entrance – vestibule / Forstue*

In the vestibule is a restored timber-frame wall built in 1980 in accord with a description. In the wall is a small window, which provided some daylight to the dispensary lad's room. The floorboards have been renewed. From the vestibule, turn right into the dispensary.

#### *Dispensary / Apotech*

The fittings and colour scheme of the dispensary are restorations, as described in the inspection report of 1767. Traces of the pale blue colour were revealed on examination of the walls, while the sky-blue colour is according to the description. The report of 1767 describes the painting over the door in detail, and mentions that the Director of Public Health had "two tablets with symbols" made. One, above the door to the examination room, depicts Iceland's coat of arms and atop it three crowns; the other, over the main entrance, shows "A Pelican, the symbol of mercy, Scales as a symbol of justice, an Anchor signifying hope and patience, a Horn of Plenty as a symbol of

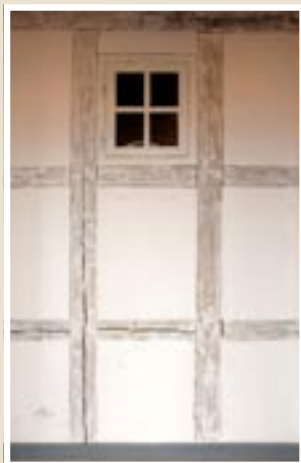
*Red-painted moulding on beam in the examination room, ground floor.*



the inconstancy of necessities, and an *erupting volcano* as a reminder of where the house is built." Plans for the dispensary fittings were made on the basis of descriptions, and taking account of fittings built in 1758 for the Apothecary's House on Bredgade in Copenhagen, on which Nesstofa was modelled. They are now preserved in a museum. The restoration was made in collaboration with Professor Jón Steffensen.

#### *Dispensary lad's room / Værelse*

Leading off the dispensary is the dispensary lad's room. The door is old. In the north wall is the original stove plate. The lad slept at the inner end of the room, by the east wall. This space now contains a guest lavatory, and electrical and water intakes.



*Restored timber-frame wall in the west entrance.*



### *Examination room/Studiercammer*

The glass door is old, but not original. According to the inspection report of 1763 there was a glass door between the dispensary and the examination room. The ceiling is painted in pearl-grey, while the mouldings on the edges of the beams are painted red, similar to the drawing room. The main pigment is cinnabar, which is listed among the pigments sent to the construction site at Nes in 1761. No evidence is available regarding the colour of the walls, and so they are left white. The surface of the walls has recently been limewashed. The floorboards have been renewed. **D**

### *Bedroom/Sovecammer*

The floor is new, and the walls are newly limewashed. Nesstofa

#### **D** Research on layers of paint

In the years since restoration began in 1980, conservation has been a growing aspect of heritage preservation. An important aspect of the restoration in 2004–8 was study of the paint traces in the building; this was carried out in collaboration by conservators at the National Museum of Iceland and Nationalmuseet in Denmark. A unique opportunity existed to compare the oldest paint traces on the walls with lists of pigments sent from Copenhagen in 1761 for use in the residence of the Director of Public Health. The original finish of the walls was high-maintenance limewash. It transpires that the colour schemes of the house followed fashionable trends in Europe, which reached Iceland via Denmark. An example is the red border at the base of light-grey walls in several rooms, a popular colour scheme among the European gentry of the time. Where no paint traces survive, walls have been left white.



was originally heated by warm air stoves. In the north wall, which has been reconstructed from scratch, is a stove similar to the original. This cast-iron stove was made at Holden, Norway in 1777, so it is some years younger than this building. It is ornamented in the rococo style, and stands on a masonry pedestal, modelled on an 18th-century Danish example.

#### *Kitchen / Kiöcken*

On the west wall are traces of the hearth: a row of slanting bricks, and the beam end which supported the chimney. Remnants of iron fastenings project from a beam; these supported the part of the chimney-breast which projected from the wall. The hearth has been partly rebuilt. Its original size is indicated by visible traces. The walls and ceiling have been painted in the original colour scheme; colour traces are visible on the beams. The kitchen has a new brick floor. Beneath the window is a new kitchen cabinet. Both are replicas based upon descriptions of the originals.



*Paint traces on wall, east entrance.*

*Front loft. Chimney built of bricks from Bessastaðir.*



### *Eastern entrance / Forstue*

On the north wall traces of several layers of paint are visible. Wall surfaces have been remade in accord with the oldest layer, and limewashed white. The blue colour, ultramarine, was popular in the 19th century. The most recent, red, layer is oil-based paint, probably of early 20th-century date. Earlier layers are painted with pigmented limewash. The floor is new. A larder was originally located beside and under the stairs. The stairs lead up to the upper floor.

### *Staircase*

The staircase was rebuilt in 2007. Plans for the stairs were based on research on the building, and also took account of stairs in Viðey Church (1772). The original stairs were closed



*Remade staircase, east entrance.*

*Front loft. Remade bannisters  
around stairwell.*



off with a door, but a decision was made not to reproduce this, as it would be impractical in view of the new usage of the house.

#### *Upper floor*

In 1774 dispensing of medicines was separated from the office of Director of Public Health. A letter written at that time by Director of Public Health Bjarni Pálsson to the government contains useful information on the use of the rooms on the upper floor. According to Bjarni, one room was used by mid-wife Margrethe Katarine J.B. Magnússen, while he uses two in his work. One contains "my electrical machine and other instruments." In the fourth room are servants' quarters.

#### *Front loft/Loft*

In the middle section of the loft the roof timbers are visible: one strut on each side, and beneath them posts buttressed on three sides by struts. Collar beams and rafters are also exposed. The clinker-built roof (of overlapping boards) is largely untouched, caulked with strips of woollen cloth soaked in tar. The roof has been renewed at the western side, where a large dormer was removed in 1980. One of the faults noted in 1763 was the lack of banisters around the stairwell, but by 1767 this had been rectified. Low vertical walls beneath the sloping roof are new, installed to conceal modern ducting for heating and lighting. The floorboards are original, partly untouched. On a beam in the kitchen were traces of another stairwell, constructed in 1774 when the building was divided lengthwise. These traces are still visible.




At the same time as construction began on Nesstofa, work also commenced on a new governor's residence, Bessastaðstofa (Bessastaðir House, now the presidential residence). Nesstofa was completed first: the governor was keen that there should be no delay to the work at Nes. His goodwill regarding the project is illustrated, for instance, by that fact that when bricks failed to be delivered to Nes from Denmark, he had part of a chimney at Bessastaðir dismantled, and sent the bricks to Nes.

#### *Southeast room / Værelse*

A timber-frame wall between the front loft and the adjoining room is a replica from 2006, while the wall between the rooms is original, dating from 1763–7. The nogging between the timbers is mostly Icelandic rock and not the conventional brick. At the bottom, at the gable end, traces of original paint layers remain. The colour scheme of the room reproduces the oldest paint layers. The original pigment may also be seen in the red border at the base of the wall. The green colour of the ceiling is also original. The floorboards remain untouched since they were laid between 1763 and 1767. As in other 18th-century stone buildings, the floor is double: the lower boards slot into grooves on the sides of beams. The cavity between the two layers was filled with varved clay. Beneath the windows are traces of damage to boards, due to leakage from windows. This became a problem within a few decades of construction. Strips of home-spun woollen cloth, used as a seal between the boards, are visible in the sloping ceiling.

*Traces of door hinges on panel wall, upper floor.*



### *Southwest room / Værelse*

The timber-frame wall between the front loft and the adjoining room is original, built 1763–7. It was partially renovated in 1984, when the floorboards were also renewed. The overlapping boards of the sloping ceiling are untouched.

### *Northwest room / Cammer*

The panel wall between the front loft and the adjoining room is in its original place. It was built using vertical boarding from the wall which partitioned the loft when the building was divided lengthwise in 1774. This boarding was originally at the south of the room, as clearly indicated by a boarded-up doorway. The panel wall between the rooms is original, and largely untouched. Traces of the original doorway are visible. At some point the room was enlarged southwards, as witness a moulded cornice under the ceiling. The ceiling of overlapping boards was repaired in 1980, and the chimney rendered. The floorboards are new. At the gable end were traces left by a stairwell made in 1774 when the house was divided in two.

### *Northeast room / Cammer*

On the gable wall by the window, the method of construction, using cut basalt rock with lime mortar, may be seen. At the edge of the window the original lime mortar is visible. The panel wall between the middle loft and the adjoining room shows traces of the original doorway and hinges. On a horizontal beam are old pegs, probably used for hanging up ropes or goods. Traces of original wall paint were found. The floor-



*Northeast room, upper floor.*



boards and overlapping ceiling boards are untouched since the 18th century.

Over the middle loft is an attic. When the building was divided into two in 1774 the attic was divided into north and south halves. The attic now houses electrical wiring and lighting equipment for the middle loft.

At the bottom of the stairs, turn left into the drawing room.

### *Drawing room/Stue*

On a ceiling beam near the exterior wall, traces of paint layers are visible. Mouldings on the edges are coloured red. Close to the floor on the partition wall and gable wall are traces of red colour on the plinth, and pale grey on the walls. The uneven



*Original paint traces in the drawing room.*



height of the coloured plinth is due to subsidence of the partition wall. On the west wall are traces of a warm air stove which heated the room, mentioned in the description of the building in 1767. The floorboards are old, but not original.

#### *Cellar/Kiælder*

The cellar of Nesstofa was the first high-quality cellar built in Iceland, with two mortared vaults which were unique in Iceland in their time. The vaults, built of lava rock with lime mortar, and rendered underneath, survive unchanged. They are now, like the walls, limewashed white. The fenestration of the basement was restored to its original form in 1980, based on research on the building. The basement steps are original, and the same is probably true of the basement door. The cellar originally had a dirt floor, but in 1980, in view of the planned use of the building, a decision was made to lay a brick floor, as in the laboratory and kitchen.

Over the cellar is a storage loft. The original form of its roof was deduced from traces found on the northern gable end of Nesstofa. The stairs to the loft are in their original location. The steps have been renewed, and the lower section can be removed, in accord with the original description.

#### *Laboratory/Laboratorium*

The oldest description of the buildings specifically mentions the size of the hearth in the laboratory: A large tapered chimney which passes up through the roof at the north end of the house, and is three-and-a quarter ells square (an ell was about 60 cm). Research on the partition wall and mid-

*Reconstructed chimney-breast  
in the laboratory, ground floor.*



The wall revealed traces of both the chimney breast and the beam which supported it. Research on the floor-supports gave unambiguous evidence of the location of the corner post. The chimney-breast was thus reconstructed, based on reliable evidence. It is a striking feature in the laboratory: medications were prepared beneath it. The actual hearth has not been rebuilt, but its size can be deduced from visible traces. In the fireplace are openings for fuel and smoke, which remain in their original form. The walls have recently been limewashed. In the laboratory is a brick floor dating from 1980. Also installed at that time are replica shelves for equipment used in making medical preparations. Both are based on old descriptions.



*Original cellar stairs.*



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