

The Landmark Trust

SILVERTON PARK STABLES, SILVERTON, DEVON

Silverton Park Stables is all that remains of a much grander project. Once, to the southeast below the driveway to the stables, stood a large nineteenth-century mansion, known as Silverton Park. It was designed by architect James Thomas Knowles (senior, 1806-84) for George Francis Wyndham, the 4th Earl of Egremont (1785-1845). Wyndham was the nephew of the 3rd Earl of Egremont, an unconventional man who avoided marriage and cohabited happily for many years at the family seat of Petworth House in Sussex with Elizabeth Iliffe, known to all as 'Mrs Wyndham.' Being illegitimate, their children were unable to inherit the title. Nephew George Wyndham, meanwhile, had been following a naval career. In 1799, at 13, he enlisted as midshipman in Nelson's navy, serving under Jane Austen's brother, Captain Francis Austen, aboard HMS *Canopus* in the Battle of Santa Domingo in 1805. Wyndham retired from the navy in 1825, by then a captain, to live in Reigate in Surrey.

Here he met a young builder and aspiring architect, J.T. Knowles. Knowles was a great advocate for patented metallic cement, for its durability, economy and versatility. Such metallic cements were popular at the time, the 'metallic' constituent being ground-up copper slag, which contained various trace metals. Used as aggregate and mixed with lime, this provided a hard hydraulic mix.

In 1836, the old Earl died and Captain Wyndham, as heir-in-law, became 4th Earl of Egremont, although Petworth House and the vast wealth of this ancient family went to the 3rd Earl's eldest natural son. Nevertheless, the 4th Earl embarked at once on a string of ambitious building projects, for which J. T. Knowles was architect. By far the biggest of the Earl's projects was an ambitious pile at Silverton, built around an earlier house called Combesatchfield. He also diverted the road for greater privacy.

From 1838, Silverton Park mansion began to spring up, an extravagant prodigy of endless classical columns and rooms. It was built of brick, but rendered with the patented metallic cement and a frieze of the Exodus of the Israelites into Egypt ran round its cornice. Its many rooms were crammed with paintings and antique statues. Meanwhile, the Earl was borrowing madly from his richer relatives and squeezing his tenants hard for higher rents to fund his grandiose ambitions. He began the quadrangular stable block and coach house to match the grandeur of the house, but neither mansion nor stable would ever be finished, for the Earl died suddenly and heavily in debt in 1845. His widow died in 1876, but no purchasers were found. In 1892, the contents were sold and in 1902, the house was demolished, the unfinished stable block passing into agricultural use.

In 1987, it came onto the market again and was acquired by the Landmark Trust's founder, Sir John Smith to prevent it being turned into flats. For many years, Landmark pondered how to restore the stable block. Its sheer scale made both its conversion and funding a challenge. Finally, in 2004, a private donor gave a sizeable donation to enable work to begin. Other donations followed, and the project was finally completed in June 2008.

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The restoration of Silverton Park Stables

The stables were restored in a gradual way by local subcontractors under Landmark's guidance. The entire building was re-roofed, missing parapets reinstated and the portico and entrance blocks tied back in to prevent structural movement. Later agricultural buildings were removed and all the brickwork re-pointed and reconsolidated. New window frames and joinery were made, copying the originals where these could not be saved.

The main carriage entrance to the quadrangle is through the west elevation, through massive, new wooden doors painted to match the original estate green. On the left as you enter is the south range, the Earl's carriage house. The carriages would have been cleaned and maintained in the workrooms on the courtyard side, before being wheeled through sliding doors to the outer side for storage and display. To create today's sitting room, we took down a central wall and blocked up the large doorways to the workrooms. This also allowed us to open up the central window in the south wall, previously blind. The flue for the woodstove is also new, as is the opening into the kitchen. Set above this opening are two large fragments of the original frieze to the mansion. The original wooden floor for the Earl's carriage house had rotted badly and was replaced using pitch pine baulk timbers salvaged from the London docks.

In the rest of the building, the original floorplan is unchanged. A former tack room has become a triple bedroom, with replacement matchboarded panelling and reproductions of original cast iron tack pegs. Other ironwork has also been carefully reproduced – the recessed ring-and-pushbutton door latches (designed to prevent horses snagging themselves as they passed) and other door furniture. The building always held surprising amount of domestic and sleeping accommodation as well as stabling, with two 'houses' in the southeast and northwest corners. Most of the stabling was in the north range, though relatively few horses seem to have been stabled here. Later agricultural changes notwithstanding, it seems a team of four horses was kept in the stable to the right of the main entrance, then three triple stalls in the north range itself, an unusual arrangement, unless the Earl favoured a troika, which harnessed three horses abreast. The marks of hayracks and stall partitions remain in these areas, and also of niches for lamps beside the doors. The lower portions of the windows were always bricked up on the courtyard side, to avoid horses kicking out the glass. Where necessary, the cobbled surface of the yard has been carefully lifted, levelled and re-laid. The original purpose of the central pit is uncertain: it may have been part of the drainage system (the well for the stables was in the northwest corner of the yard). Considerable landscaping has been done to correct the external ground levels around the stable block.

Today, the stable block is all that is left to remind us of the ambitious plans of the 4th Earl of Egremont and his architect, J. T Knowles. It now has a new purpose, one that will ensure its future survival, as parties of up to fourteen people stay here, imagining the sound of hooves on the cobbled courtyard and the Earl strolling through with his friends to admire the carriages and their teams.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Silverton Park Stables sleeps up to 14 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.