

The Landmark Trust

WORTHAM MANOR, LIFTON, DEVON

Wortham Manor was only recognised as a building of more than ordinary interest after the Second World War. Architectural enthusiasts remained unaware of its existence partly because of its remote location; its reduced status as a farmhouse from the middle of the 18th century until 1945; and because from the outside it does not look medieval.

Wortham was finally 'discovered' by the architect Philip Tilden in 1943, who became its owner a few years later. He described in his autobiography how Wortham was one of the most beautiful houses of the late 15th century that he had ever seen. He spent many months, with the help of two "most conscientious German prisoners", removing plaster ceilings to expose the exceptional carved oak ones that can be seen today.

The origins and developments of Wortham remain to this day somewhat unclear. Originally there would have been a typical medieval manor house, with an open hall at its centre and a short wing at its east end containing a solar chamber on the first floor, also with an open roof. The hall range continued to the west with the usual service rooms 'below' the screens passage, which probably had a gallery above providing access to the upper storeys of the porch. The hall itself was entered through the fine north porch with its decorative carving dated to about 1450.

A second phase of remodelling and modernisation then took place probably in the first quarter of the 16th century. The major alteration was the insertion of a floor into the open hall to create an upper and lower hall. The upper hall was reached by a new newel stair in a turret added onto the back or south wall of the hall. West of the hall, the former service rooms were turned into a parlour with a new ceiling similar in detail to that in the hall. Thereafter there were only minor alterations such as the addition of the panelling and fireplace in the parlour around 1600, and the creation of a farmhouse kitchen in the room to the east of the hall, probably after 1750, together with new ceilings which were to hide the early carpentry for the next two centuries.

This simple account is open to debate and others have argued that the central part of Wortham was in fact rebuilt in one complete phase soon after 1500 in its existing form. In a very traditional area, this would have been an advanced form of planning perhaps brought about by the family responsible, the Dinhams, who had business and family contacts in London and the south east where such ideas were more commonplace by this date.

Originally the house had crenellations on top of the hall wall to distinguish this important centre of the house from the rest. The porch, with its panel or tympanum carved in the intractable local granite by local craftsmen, was clearly intended to be decorative and to herald something grand beyond. The College at Week St Mary, also owned by the Landmark Trust, had a nearly identical outer door, reliably dated to 1506.

The south front presents a less unified appearance. The walls are of different stone and of less high quality, revealing evidence of the manor house that must have existed here for at least a century before the early 16th century. The windows are a mixture dating from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

Philip Tilden's work in the 1940s was so carefully done that it isn't clear exactly what he did. Certainly, the very unusual screen now in the hall was built into a wall somewhere else in the house when he moved in. The Tildens moved on in 1949 and eventually Wortham was sold to the Landmark Trust by Miss Mildred Burgess in 1969.

As originally repaired, the house was converted into three flats – one for Miss Burgess and two for others to rent. A condition of receiving grant aid was that the main rooms – the old kitchen, hall and great chamber above – would have to be occasionally open to the public and so it was resolved to leave them as public spaces held in common by all three flats, rather as in the Tudor period they provided communal space for a household whose members would withdraw to separate apartments or lodgings at other times.

South of the old kitchen had been a dairy, already converted by the Burgesses into a sitting room. Beyond that was the cider house, still with its press, and this was converted to provide a kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. To create a new kitchen for the flat on the first floor of the east wing, the loft over the cider house was built up to full height, and given a new roof over it with a hipped gable and three new windows looking south.

The third flat was formed to the west of the hall. A kitchen was fitted into the closet next to the parlour instead of into a derelict addition still further west, which was constructed of cob and collapsed after heavy rains. The great chamber closet was included in this flat as its third bedroom, together with the bathroom that already existed in the porch.

Other major work included returning the roofs to their original form and appearance as most of the timber needed renewal anyway. A new stone chimney stack was built for the fireplace in Miss Burgess's sitting room. Others were given stone rather than brick tops, and the chimneys of the main range were given new granite caps based on those shown in a drawing dated 1716. The stone all came from field walls being demolished by the Highways Department, and the new slates came from the Delabole quarry in North Cornwall.

Structural repairs were carried out including underpinning of the walls. Woodworm, dry rot and death watch beetle all had to be tackled. Damp proof membranes were installed along with underfloor heating to provide a gentle background heat without the danger of drying out the timbers. Trusses, windbraces, lintels, joist and beams all had to be checked and their ends repaired or strengthened as necessary.

All this work took several years, and it was only in 1974 that Wortham emerged from its cocoon of scaffolding. The cost had also increased dramatically to two or three times what had originally been expected.

For 15 years Wortham remained divided into its three flats. But the main rooms, seldom visited by the public, were becoming rather sad and empty places, and there were also practical problems such as noise from adjoining flats. So in 1990 it was resolved to reunite the house formally. This was easy to do, with the old farmhouse kitchen taking on once again its former role. Wortham can now be used very much as it always has been, and the self-contained life of a small but rich, manor house re-created and understood.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Wortham Manor sleeps up to 15 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.