

BECKFORD' S TOWER, LANSDOWN ROAD, BATH

Beckford's Tower was built between 1825 and 1827 by William Beckford (1760-1844) to designs drawn up by H.E. Goodridge. It was built by Beckford as a daily destination of retreat from his main house, No. 20 Lansdown Crescent. He would retire to the sumptuously furnished Tower to read, appreciate the many fine objets and paintings he had amassed and contemplate the view from his belvedere.

Beckford himself was a fascinating figure who, while not widely known today, still attracts much interest and scholarship. He was a brilliant and precocious only child, born to immense wealth, which derived from sugar plantations in Jamaica worked by enslaved black people. Perhaps overprotected by his mother after his father's early death, he was educated mostly at home and was sent abroad to finish his education in Geneva. This was the first of many European tours that were to encourage his eclectic cultural tastes and make him disinclined to take up the role in English politics for which his mother hoped.

He was a lively and colourful character, fond of music, the arts and, somewhat vicariously, religion and its trappings. He was very attractive to both sexes and it was clear early on that his preferences lay with his own. At eighteen, he fell madly in love with eleven-year old William Courtenay, a relationship which developed over the next six years. In 1783, he married Lady Margaret Gordon, but this did not prevent the so-called Powderham Castle Scandal the following year, over his relationship with Courtenay. Beckford and his wife left England; it was a happy marriage which bore two daughters, but Margaret died in 1786. The scandal over Courtenay resulted in Beckford's ostracism by English society for the next decade or so, from which he never really recovered. It also reinforced an increasing tendency towards reclusion as Beckford realised that his own liberal attitudes and refined tastes were not those of his social peers, or 'the Worldlings' as he called them. A prolific writer, he published a novel, *Vathek*, and various travel and other works during his lifetime.

He is mostly famous as the builder of Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, an extravagant Gothic fantasy based on mediaeval monastic buildings. Its central tower was close to three hundred feet high. It was designed by James Wyatt and was a hugely important building in its day. However, Beckford found he did not enjoy living in it and was heavily in debt. He sold it in 1822 to an aged gunpowder millionaire and moved to Bath. The central tower at the Abbey collapsed in 1825; only a fragment remains today.

The Tower that Beckford built in Bath is an important example of Picturesque architecture, which involved an informal relationship between man and his landscape and was chiefly characterised by its eclectic combination of styles. The Tower and its accommodation block represent a combination of what became known as the Italian Villa Style and of Greek Revival architecture, and they represent early and important examples of both. The blocking of the accommodation block is thought to reflect that of Tuscan vernacular architecture, from which a watchtower often sprang. Beckford and Goodridge's innovation was in including classical Greek references to that tower. In its liveliness of style and integration to its natural surroundings, the Tower was one of the first introductions of the Picturesque to post-Georgian Bath.

Certainly there are similarities between the soaring shaft and almost top heavy belvedere of Beckford's Tower and Tuscan campanili. The square shaft of the tower rises as some 130 feet of plain masonry, relieved only by small windows to the spiral staircase it encloses. The tower then bursts out into an exuberant expression of Greek references. The break between the plain shaft and the belvedere is achieved by a deep Doric entablature with a bold cornice. In the belvedere, three recessed windows are emphasised by square piers between. Above the next cornice are long panels of Greek key-fret decoration, while cubic blocks topped by roundels mark the angles. The next tier is a highly decorated polygonal plinth for the crowning octagonal lantern, and is made of wood with a fluted cast iron column at each angle. The observer is then provided with a continuous vista through the ring of round windows, which present themselves at eye-height internally.

After repairs carried out by the Beckford Tower Trust from 1997, the Lantern is now crowned once more with an accurate replica of Beckford's cast iron acroteria, of which only a single length had survived. The Tower's total height is 154 feet, from a spot already 800 feet above sea level. The Lantern is thought to have been inspired by the Tower of Winds (an appropriate reference in this exposed spot) and the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, both in Athens. Their use as sources for Greek Revival work was not new, but it was their use together that was new and daring. Only three earlier examples are known, and these were all in London churches.

The accommodation block at the base provided the villa reference, with its impression of low massing, flats roofs, small paired semi-circular windows and pierced parapets. The entrance porch presents a loggia in miniature, with three semi-circular headed arches with heavy imposts. The freestanding arch on the roof of the block turned the chimneys into an integrated folly. Originally, the windows were all plate glass (then considered a prodigy) and covered by gilded cast iron grilles, which lent a touch of the Byzantine.

After Beckford's death in 1844, his daughter gave Beckford's Tower and grounds to Walcot Parish for a funerary chapel and cemetery. The Tower itself grew increasingly dilapidated and in 1931 was seriously damaged by fire. Repaired and altered at this stage, the Tower remained a chapel until 1970, when the Church deconsecrated it and declared the cemetery redundant. The Tower was converted into residential accommodation in 1972. In 1977 the Beckford Tower Trust was formed and a major repair programme followed in 1997. In 2000, the Landmark Trust took a long lease on the rooms in the ground floor of the accommodation block.

Beckford used the tower as a private museum for his fine collection of objets de vertu, riding up most days from his house on Lansdowne Crescent. The display rooms were richly decorated, their appearance in Beckford's time captured in lithographs by H.E. Goodridge. Because such detailed and reliable evidence survived, Landmark took the decision to reinstate the rich finishes in the vestibule (today's kitchen) and the Scarlet Drawing Room to an appearance that Beckford himself would recognise. The painted coffered ceiling was recreated and silk moiré hung on the walls. A plywood replica was made of the fine marble console, and this and the chimney piece were skilfully marbled using traditional paint techniques.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Beckford's Tower sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.