

# The Landmark Trust

## THE CHINA TOWER, BICTON, DEVON

The China Tower was erected in 1839 for the last of one of the great Devon dynasties, John, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Rolle (2<sup>nd</sup> creation) of Stevenstone, (1750/1-1842), by his second wife Louisa Trefusis (1796-1885). Daughter of the 17<sup>th</sup> Baron Clinton, Louise was also of ancient lineage. The Stevenstone connection makes The China Tower a 'descendant' of another Landmark, The Library at Stevenstone (probably built by Lord Clinton's great-great-grandfather Sir John Rolle c.1700). The Bicton and Stevenstone estates were united from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Rolles were an ancient Devon family who had amassed vast acreages in the county through marriage and purchase.

Lord John Rolle inherited Bicton and Stevenstone in 1796 from his father Dennys Rolle, becoming by a second creation 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Rolle of Stevenstone (as the more ancient seat) in the same year. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, after the failure of his attempt to set up white colonies in East Florida, Dennys Rolle established extensive plantations worked by enslaved Africans in the Bahamas. Lord John Rolle therefore benefited from the compensation paid out by the government after the Emancipation Act of 1838, though he allowed his former workers to take over to his Bahamian lands without payment. These lands are held communally and inalienably by the descendants to this day.

Lord Rolle continued the development of Bicton House and landscaping of its park begun by his father and uncles, developing the parkland around the formal Italianate gardens created in the 1730s. James Wyatt transformed the house in 1800. Lord Rolle had no children in his first marriage, and was seventy when his first wife, Judith, died in 1820. He lost no time seeking a new spouse in the hope of an heir. His choice fell on Louisa Trefusis, who was just twenty six when they married in 1822. This union was also childless, but the marriage was a contented one and the couple put much energy into elaborating the wonderful landscape they created at Bicton. W. S. Gilpin (nephew of author William Gilpin who wrote on the Picturesque) designed the tree planting around a great lake that was excavated in the park in the 1820s. Bicton's arboretum and pinetum soon became renowned (they include many species from America, building on Lord Rolle's father, Dennys's connections with estates in Florida and the Bahamas). The Exeter nurseries run by the Veitch family, at the heart of a network of passionate 19<sup>th</sup>-century plantsmen, were also closely involved in the park's development.

In the 1830s, the tract of pinewood known as Baker's Brake in which the tower stands was brought into the Bicton home park from the neighbouring parish of Colaton Raleigh. By now, Lord Rolle was in his eighties and (despite his great stature) becoming frailer – he stumbled twice on the steps to the throne as he paid homage to Queen Victoria at her coronation in Westminster Abbey in 1837. The same year, Lady Rolle was writing to their agent Mr Daw about plans for a 'Castle', to be built on the knoll in Baker's Brake. The castellated tower, which has four floors and a separate stair turret, sits on a low-walled platform and is a typical example of a late-Picturesque eyecatcher, visible from Bicton House and with its own views of the sea and across the estate.

We owe the tradition that The China Tower was built as a birthday surprise for Lord Rolle to J. C. Loudon, the writer who visited most of the great early-19<sup>th</sup>-century gardens. Loudon visited Bicton in September 1840 and recorded *This tower is understood to have been built by Lady Rolle, entirely unknown to Lord Rolle, and undiscovered by him, as an agreeable surprise for his birth-day, October 16<sup>th</sup> 1839, when he completed his 88<sup>th</sup> year; and the following birth-day, Lady Rolle surprised Lord Rolle with the china room...It contains several rooms; in one of which, appropriately fitted up, a rich collection of china is tastefully displayed.* His visit is also, therefore, the source for the use of the tower to display a china collection, although the lack of wall space on the upper floors suggests that the china must have been displayed in freestanding cases. Sources differ on whether

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Lord Rolle walked up the steps unaided to the top of the tower to enjoy the fine views, or whether he was carried up in a chair by two footmen.

The 1841 and 1851 censuses for Colaton Raleigh list Thomas Sage, gardener, and his wife Charlotte (with two children by the 1841 census) living at Belvedere, one of the tower's names. The lower floor(s) may therefore have doubled as an estate cottage. A charming illustration to an 1845 estate map shows Lord and Lady Rolle standing in front of the tower, a landau nearby, having no doubt ridden up the Green Drive from the house. Lord Rolle had died in 1842, and a life tenancy of the estate passed to Louisa's six-year old nephew, the Hon. Mark Rolle. He eventually took up residence at Stevenstone, leaving Louisa in residence at Bickton as an indomitable dowager, to continue her passion for gardening until her death in 1885. When Mark Rolle died without sons in 1907, the estate passed to his nephew, Charles Trefusis, 21<sup>st</sup> Baron Clinton, and has continued in the male line since. In 1947, Bickton House was leased to Devon County Council as an agricultural college. Lord Clinton restored Bickton Park and opened the gardens to the public in 1963. In 1986, the gardens were sold to a charitable trust and today operate as Bickton Park Botanical Gardens.

The China Tower, meanwhile, was occupied briefly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but had stood empty since. Alone in the woods, it became an increasing target for vandals. In 2010 the Clinton Devon Estates approached the Landmark Trust seeking a partnership to restore and find a new use for the tower. Landmark has now taken a long lease to let the tower for holidays.

#### Restoration

The tower had no water or electricity; the ground floor originally had a range, presumably for servants to prepare refreshments, but otherwise there was just one small fireplace on the third floor. The tower was empty, derelict and with a leaking roof and mould spreading across walls when work started. The tower was completely scaffolded and all the render carefully surveyed for cracks and repaired. Electrical cables to the tower have been buried, and air source heating installed. The parapet was re-rendered and the water repelling detailing improved. The rear service rooms were re-built on the original footings. A new stone window was inserted on the first floor. On the ground floor, an original flagstone floor was found beneath later screed; a new kitchen was made by the Landmark team and a tiny shower room shoehorned into the rear extension. The next two floors became bedrooms, with the sitting room on the top floor, where windows in every available angle make the most of the views. The Rolle Trefusis arms above the door to the stair turret were skilfully restored and the approach to the tower along Lady Louisa's Green Drive re-surfaced.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The China Tower sleeps up to 4 people. To book the tower or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit our website [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk) or phone our Booking Office on 01628 825920.*