

# The Landmark Trust

## COBHAM DAIRY

Grade II\* Cobham Dairy was designed in 1794-5 for the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Darnley by James Wyatt, one of the most prolific and renowned 18<sup>th</sup>-century architects. Not only is it an outstanding example of a late-Georgian pleasure dairy, it is also an exceptionally well-documented building since Wyatt's annotated plans and elevations survive at Yale, as do the estate accounts at Medway Archives.

Masquerading as a diminutive chapel, the Dairy provides a Gothick eye-catcher in the pleasure grounds south of Cobham Hall, an Elizabethan great house updated by Wyatt for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Earls in the same years that Humphry Repton was refashioning its surrounding landscape. Wyatt also designed the spectacular pyramidal mausoleum for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl in the woods nearby (never finally used, and now in the care of the National Trust).

Model dairies such as this were a distinctively feminine space in a largely male world. Mary II had such a dairy at Hampton Court as early as 1689; Marie Antoinette also played at milkmaids in a dairy at Le Hameau in Versailles in the 1780s. It was a place where the ladies of the house could repair to enjoy the simple pleasures of butter churning, making cheese and skimming cream, in cool dark spaces that were typically both functional and highly decorative, using specially made china vessels and altogether more refined than a typical working farm dairy. Conversation and the tasting of the dairy's produce might follow.

The Cobham example is no exception. Its form mimics a little chapel: it has a central double height chamber with clerestory windows that held coloured glass and the Darnley arms, much like the Wyatt screen in the entrance hall to the Hall. This is surrounded on three sides by arcaded 'cloisters,' originally all open loggias although we have enclosed that on the south side to gain the space necessary for the Dairy's new use.

Dairies were designed to be kept cool. Here, the exterior was entirely clad in slates, butt jointed, beautifully shaped around the Gothick arches of the arcades and then painted in sanded paint in imitation of stone. These slates were mostly removed in the 1980s; those that remain are a rare and very important survival of this short-lived innovation, a product of the explosion in building techniques in late Georgian years. Slate cladding was favoured by Wyatt for the evenness of texture it lent otherwise humble brick structures (not least because he had a family interest in the Penrhyn quarries from where the slate originated).

The Dairy's open entrance loggia faces north towards the Hall, through which a glazed door led to a main chamber with a sunken floor. In the centre of this was a large circular feature, rather like a font, in which cold water or even ice might be put to keep a bowl of dairy produce cool. On each side wall there are three pointed alcoves, the central ones deeper, all perhaps once used for display or storage of the dishes.

All around the walls of this central room was a shelf of cool Carrara marble, with a ribbed, vaulted ceiling of plastered lathes above, springing from corbels of clustered oak leaves. The south and west cloisters had the same lovely ceilings.

The south and east cloisters were the (real life) dairymaid's quarters: she slept in the east cloister, warmed by a small fireplace, with a copper in her tiny scullery for warming pans and

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keeping them clean. The small hearth fed into a flue that emerges disguised as a tiny bell tower, complete with a bell whose tolling, perhaps, called the cows to be milked. A few years after the dairy was built, a fine rustic wooden Cowhouse was built nearby, sadly now lost. This was probably designed by Humphry Repton, since his son George left careful record drawings of it (but now sadly lost). Behind the dairy is a sunken feature, that was probably a cold store, or even an ice house, although there is another ice-house elsewhere in the grounds

The Dairy has been on Landmark's radar since the mid-1990s. By the time Cobham Hall became a girls' boarding school in 1962, the Dairy had deteriorated, descending into near ruination, its fine plaster ceilings falling to the ground. In the 1980s, an SPAB working party cleared the walls of ivy and the structure was repaired and re-roofed into a weathertight shell. Despite the importance of the building, during these years the school authorities were reluctant to allow third party use in their grounds, and after the restoration of the Darnley Mausoleum under the Cobham Ashenbank Management Scheme in 2013, the Dairy became the last piece of unfinished business on the estate.

Thanks to the surviving evidence, documentary as well as physical, Landmark has been able to carry out a particularly thorough restoration. Wyatt's slate cladding technique has been revived for the exterior, and, painted with sanded paint, the building again gleams against the trees as if made of fine white stone. A master plasterer and his team have recreated the vaulted ceilings in the main chamber and cloisters alike, reinstating work attributed to *stuccadero* Francis Bernasconi, who was working at Cobham Hall 1800-1809 on very similar ceilings. Decorative bosses and corbels have been remodelled in situ by hand. New leaded windows have been made, with slips of coloured glass and the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl and Countess's coats of arms painted onto the entrance door. A new shelf of Carrara marble has been installed around the central chamber, standing on specially made cast iron supports. The decorative floor, of Portland and red Cumbrian stone, has been pieced back together after the installation of underfloor heating beneath.

Frustratingly, no evidence has yet come to light in letters or family papers of examples of use of the Dairy, but we do know the name of its first dairymaid, Sarah Hemmings and then Ann Parsons. Cobham Dairy was a happy combination of genuinely working dairy (with resident dairymaid and Cowhouse) and pleasure dairy, where the Countess might divert her friends and her children. Its exquisite form certainly proves that it was built to please the most polite of company.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Cobham Dairy sleeps 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*