

The Landmark Trust

ELTON HOUSE, BATH

In 1699 John Hall of Bradford-on-Avon granted to Edward Marchant of the City of Bath, Mason and builder, a lease of the plot of land on Abbey Green now occupied by Elton House. At this time the larger properties that had occupied the site of the Abbey Precinct since the Dissolution were being subdivided and built over. The area to the north of Abbey Green had been a garden, belonging to Charles Swallow, so the house built by Edward Marchant must have been the first to stand here.

This earliest house seems to have been of three floors with a substantial basement, but only one room deep: the rear wall of the north-east basement room has a window in it, showing the room behind to be a secondary addition. In the basement was a kitchen and a second room in which there is a stone niche or buffet with a fine shell head. This, with other fine masonry detail in the central lobby, led to the theory that this might at one time have been a main floor, but it now appears more likely that all have been moved from elsewhere.

At the back of the first house there was a central wing, probably for a stair, and likely containing the surviving very fine staircase, which was later moved to its present position. It still relates to earlier floor levels.

Between about 1710 and 1720, this first house was enlarged by the addition of wings on either side of the stair but extending west beyond it, on all floors. This could have been part of the original plan, since only at basement level do there seem to have been windows in the back wall.

Edward Marchant was a developer as well as a builder and profited from the early eighteenth-century building boom in Bath. His will, dated 1735, left the house and its furniture to his daughter, Elizabeth Brydges, although stipulated that another daughter, Ann, was allowed to stay on there after his death, in the room that had been her lodging. In 1738, Elizabeth, now a widow, married a second time, to Jacob Elton, Alderman of Bristol. Jacob was a son of the commercial and shipping magnate, Sir Abraham Elton, 1st Baronet. This large family had extensive interests in the slave trade on which Bristol relied in this period, shipping their metal goods to Africa to be exchanged for enslaved people, who were then transported to plantations in the Americas, the ships returning to Britain laden with cotton, tobacco and sugar.

Elizabeth and Jacob Elton almost certainly lived in Bristol and not in Elton House. However they made several alterations and improvements to the house after 1749, when they purchased the lease from the Duke of Kingston. It is likely that these were intended to convert the house into sets of lodgings to accommodate the affluent visitors flocking to the city. The house was re-faced in ashlar and given new windows; the ceilings of the rooms on the first and second floors were raised, and decorated with new cornices, fireplaces and panelling. The staircase was moved into a new stairwell, set further back between the side wings.

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Although it is the Eltons' name that has stayed with the house, it was theirs for less than thirty years. In 1765, the year of her husband's death, Elizabeth Elton's trustees sold it to Joseph Terry, haberdasher. His family owned the house, now called 2 Abbey Street, for 120 years, although they do not seem to have lived there after about 1830. In 1851 it was let to a grocer who later, having risen to the position of Superintendent of the Mineral Water Baths, bought the lease.

Further additions were made since the Eltons: an attic storey, window bays to the rear wings, with a block of closets at the southern corner, the cottage and most noticeably the shop front, probably all of around 1800. However, through these many changes of owner, and countless different occupiers, Elton House has, in its essential character, survived as it was made by Edward Marchant and his daughter, Elizabeth Elton. It tells of the more humdrum and provincial side of Bath, a side that existed alongside the formal grandeur of the Woods but has now largely disappeared.

In the nineteenth century the area around Abbey Green was no longer fashionable or prosperous, and most of the houses were divided into innumerable tiny dwellings. Elton House was no exception, and it was in this neglected but unaltered condition that it was first seen by Miss Philippa Savery in 1946: home to twelve different tenants and with a cobbler's shop on the ground floor.

Miss Savery was looking for somewhere to set up a business selling antiques and became the occupier of the front half of the shop, and rent collector for the whole house, on behalf of Miss Dingle, the owner. As Miss Savery worked hard on a Sunday to get ready for opening, one of the tenants sang hymns to make up for her irregular behaviour. But the antiques shop was soon well-known and loved, especially by the people of Bath who recognised it as a symbol of much that was disappearing around them, and they would arrive with artefacts rescued from the debris of demolition.

As rooms fell empty, Miss Savery took on the tenancies, and finally on Miss Dingle's death in 1962 was able to buy the whole house. Miss Savery herself died on November 27th 1996. Until then, she and Elton House had been full and equal partners. Much ingenuity and imagination had gone into their survival together, and their skilful evasion of the heavy hand of modernisation. The garden she created at the back of the house is a particular source of pleasure; as is the view of green fields above Bath, still to be enjoyed from the windows at its front.

In 1982 Miss Savery handed on the care of Elton House to the Landmark Trust. Peter Bird, our architect, described his work there as rather like 'conserving a cobweb'. The roof was renewed, and we had to rebuild the tottering south gable and carry out some masonry repairs. We made two bathrooms on the top floor, and a kitchen where Miss Savery's bathroom used to be. Miss Savery's kitchen became the housekeeper's linen store. The house welcomed its first Landmark visitors in April 1986.

Since then, we have continued to maintain, decorate and mend the house as gently as possible, so far resisting the fashion for steam-cleaning stonework in Bath, so that the house continues as a proud example of the true effects of time and former coal fires. The antiques shop, sitting room and cottage are rented out, the letting income also contributing to Landmark's charitable mission of rescuing historic buildings. Elton House now offers lodging to new generations of visitors to Bath, coming to admire the city's beauty and enjoy its sociability just as they did in the 18th century.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Elton House sleeps up to 10 people. To book, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk.