

The Landmark Trust

MANOR FARM, PULHAM MARKET, NR. DISS, NORFOLK

There is no written evidence to provide dates for the building of the farmhouse and the buildings nearby, and very little concerning the people who lived there. Dendrochronological dating (using tree rings) suggest that the house was built soon after 1597. Some deeds of 1643 indicate that it then belonged to a family called Maltiward.

The Maltiwards were yeoman farmers. Yeomen had a reputation for good living ("at our Yeoman's table," wrote Thomas Fuller, "you shall have no meat disguised with strange sauces... beset with sallads on every side, but solid substantial food"), but were also usually thrifty and hard-working. Their houses, clothes and possessions were simply made even if of good quality; after a good harvest they would keep their money in hand (or under the mattress) for a bad year, or use it to buy more land. That they also had a strong sense of duty and felt a responsibility for maintaining law and order is shown by the fact that parish officials were almost always drawn from the ranks of yeomen. Judging from the house they built, the Maltiwards were comfortably off; a house with eight rooms - which it had by the mid-17th century - would have been considered substantial.

By the early 18th century Manor Farm had passed into the hands of a man named Richard Baker, who is described as a worsted weaver. (In the first of the 20th-century restorations, traces of a loom were found in the house.) He was following a long-established local tradition of combining weaving with farming: small farmers often needed some secondary occupation on which they could fall back in years of crop failure, and weaving was the most usual choice in the neighbourhood. Many surviving probate inventories list quantities of cloth among the deceased's possessions. In the mid-16th century, so vital a part of the village economy was this work that when weaving was suppressed in many rural areas (to protect the Norwich weavers), Pulham was made an exception.

After Richard Baker's death Manor Farm passed to his daughter Hannah, the wife of Robert Thrower, and then to her son Richard for his lifetime only, eventually reverting to his cousin Noah, a miller from Tivetshall St Mary. Noah and Richard, however, came to an agreement after Robert's death: Richard took over all rights in Manor Farm, and Noah was given Richard's share in the mill, in which he already had a controlling interest.

Richard died a few years later and his widow Lucy and their seven children continued to live in the house and to farm the land. In 1844 the Throwers sold the farm to the Hotson family, who continued there until the 1920s. They in turn sold the farm to the Andrews family, but none of them seems to have lived in the house: it fell empty, and began to sink into disrepair. In 1945 it was sold to a junk dealer for demolition, but fortunately he did not feel happy about pulling it down. At this point it providentially came to the attention of Monica Dance, secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who rapidly decided that her personal intervention was required, and with her husband Harry bought it forthwith.

The Dances restored the farmhouse lovingly and sensitively, subjecting it to the minimum of alteration. It was underpinned and the timber framing carefully reinforced where it was shaky, the roof was re-thatched with reed, several blocked windows were opened up and the walls were repaired with local clay in the traditional manner.

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RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Landmark Trust, a charity that specialises in rescuing buildings of architectural and historic importance, bought Manor Farm from Mrs Dance in 1979. There was no need for a full-scale renovation of the building, but a certain amount of work did have to be carried out.

First, there were alterations needed to fit the building for continuous use by larger numbers of people, including the fitting of a second bathroom into a landing at the top of the stairs in the kitchen block. Additional oak shelving and cupboards were also provided in the kitchen.

Secondly, there were the more thorough repairs that arise every generation or so in the usual routine of building maintenance, it being exactly 30 years since Mrs Dance's original restoration. Sections of many of the window frames needed renewing, as did one or two of the rafters in the kitchen end roof and some of the ridge tiles too. The kitchen chimney, which was letting in a lot of damp, had to be rebuilt and the area inside it damp-proofed. The whole of the building was replastered, and a new coat of colour-tinted limewash was applied to the exterior, and of white limewash to the inside.

Thirdly, the opportunity was taken to introduce certain small improvements while other work was in progress. Lead piping was replaced, and some of the wiring was renewed in less obtrusive form. The main alteration was the removal of the downstairs bathroom from the oak-panelled pantry in the older part of the house, to the larder or pantry in the later addition, which in turn has now been removed. A more efficient water heater was then fitted into the airing cupboard upstairs, and a ventilated food cupboard built into the kitchen where the old boiler used to stand.

In the larder the traditional slatted dairy window has been retained. Another original window, in the buttery, was opened up, although it now only looks into the kitchen. Finally, a new heating system was installed. The difficulty was to do this without endangering the oak partitions, which could be damaged by the drying-out effect of full central heating. Instead, night storage heaters have been used to provide background warmth, which can then be boosted by open fires.

In 2006 our local thatcher, Stephen Letch, replaced the reed on the south slope with more historically correct longstraw thatch. The north slope will be done in due course when it needs replacing. Around the outside of the house, the flowerbeds planted by Mrs Dance's tenants were grassed over and replaced by small trees. A new entrance was made, and a space for leaving cars, by the farm buildings. Work has continued to repair the main group of barns nearest the house using traditional clay lump, with a clay plaster and tarred finish.

The work was carried out for the Landmark Trust by Hoggs the builders, under the guidance of Mrs Rolt and the architect Henry Freeland. As much care as possible has been taken to keep any changes in keeping both with the previous careful restoration, and with the character of the original building. In some small ways the comforts of the 21st century, while being added to, have been made to impinge rather less on the 16th-century yeoman's dwelling. In this way you can, when you stay here, all the more enjoy the full flavour of the building, unadorned but at the same time rich like that same yeoman's favourite diet of plain roast meat.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Manor Farm sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.