

# The Landmark Trust

## **MONKTON OLD HALL, MONKTON, PEMBROKESHIRE**

A small Benedictine priory was founded at Pembroke in 1098, and probably established itself on the hill opposite the castle, which came to be called Monkton, a century later. The main buildings of the Priory are thought to have lain immediately next to St Nicholas' church. The Old Hall is further away, but there is a very strong tradition that it was connected with them and the likelihood is that it was built as a Guest-house.

Hospitality was one of the requirements laid down in the Benedictine Rule, and in the days before inns became common, but when a surprising number of people in fact travelled, the monasteries were almost the only place where they could be sure of a night's lodging. If a monastery was on a pilgrim route they could expect to put up a steady flow of guests.

Monkton Priory was small and not very wealthy, with only four or five monks in addition to the Prior; but it was close to a great castle, and on the pilgrim route to St David's, so a guest-house would have been very necessary. This would also explain the arrangement of the Old Hall, which is more typical of a medieval house than of a monastic building, with its great hall, and cross-wing containing separate chambers.

As a building it is very difficult to date. There are almost no dateable details - mouldings and such-like - and what there are have a rather faked-up air, as though they have been inserted later by someone with a romantic sense of the past. However, the plan type is a very early one. Upper halls, that is halls over a vaulted undercroft, were common in England for the two centuries after the Conquest, but were seldom seen after 1300. In Wales and Scotland they continued for longer - their defensive advantages are obvious - and fine examples were built by Bishop Gower at his palaces at St David's and Lamphey in the early 14th century. So the likelihood is that Monkton is also 14th century - but it could be up to a century later.

One of the difficulties of dating the building is that since the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, Monkton has led a chequered career. It has changed hands several times; it has been in a ruinous state at least twice; and has been rescued and restored twice, once in 1879 by a scholarly medieval enthusiast called J.R. Cobb, and once in this century by Miss Muriel Thompson (later Mrs Bowen), with some help from Clough Williams-Ellis.

So the hooded "Edwardian" fireplace, now in the hall and previously (but not originally) in the south-east wing, could come from this building or from another. All dateable carpentry has disappeared long ago. Even the slender cylindrical chimney, so characteristic of Pembrokeshire and thought to be early, was added onto a stack built for a square shaft, so is secondary to the original building, at least, and may be much later.

Whatever its problems for scholars and archaeologists, Monkton Old Hall feels early, and certainly conveys to us an early pattern of life, with its uncompromising stoniness but strong sense of hospitality. It is remembered by many for Mrs Bowen's Christmas parties, and that is quite right for a building which was intended to welcome travellers.

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## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Landmark Trust, as a charity which rescues buildings of architectural and historic importance, bought Monkton Old Hall in 1979 from Mrs Campbell, who had been left the house by her godmother, Mrs Bowen. Although the house had been lived in and looked after by Mrs Bowen until her death in 1978, there were still some major repairs that she had not been able to undertake.

The chief of these was the eradication of dry rot, which had started in a wing built onto the north-west corner by J.R. Cobb, and then spread into the roof of the hall. In the end it was decided to take down the wing altogether, since the accommodation it contained would not be needed. The two doors leading to it had medieval stone surrounds, and these have been left visible. The roof was stripped, and rotten or infected timbers replaced, before the slates were relaid.

The second problem was the round chimney, which was leaning dangerously over the roof, due to subsidence in the wall beneath. The stack had to be taken right down, each stone being carefully numbered; the wall was then strengthened, and the whole chimney rebuilt, exactly the same as before, but vertical.

Thirdly, the upper face of the south-east wing, corbelled out over the curious arch, was leaning badly outwards over the road. This was mainly due to the weight of the hooded fireplace inside, which the wall beneath was too thin to support - one reason for thinking that it was not originally in that position. The fireplace was therefore removed to the hall, where it is more in character, and the wall of the wing rebuilt.

At the southern end of the cross passage there was a medieval doorway, possibly put there by Cobb. It made the passage into something of a wind tunnel and since its lintel was entirely rotten - this being the weather side - it was decided to block it up, but again leaving the stone surround visible.

The only other alterations inside the Old Hall have been to provide a new kitchen, and bathrooms, together with new wiring and heating, and redecorating. The walls have been limewashed, which allows them to breathe, and helps prevent damp. The timbers in the hall have been painted with zinc chromate, usually used for painting ships, but providing exactly the right sort of "William Burges" red. Some of the furniture, such as the table in the hall and the four poster bed, belonged to Mrs Bowen and have been lent to the Trust by Mrs Campbell.

Outside, a wall was built in place of the north-west wing, to shelter the courtyard. The ground level of this was raised to bring it up to the entrance door, as it appeared in an old engraving. Mrs Bowen's garden, planted on old terraces and between old walls, was an important part of Monkton's special character. It has only been possible to maintain a skeleton of this, but the view across to the Castle is as grand as ever.

The architect for the restoration was the late Leonard Beddall-Smith; the building work was carried out by Argent's, the same firm that worked at Monkton in the 1950s. The work was completed in 1981.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Monkton Old Hall sleeps up to 7 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*