

The Landmark Trust

NICOLLE TOWER, ST CLEMENT'S, JERSEY

Nicolle Tower owes its current form to at least three separate phases of construction. It began life as a single cell: a single room, single storey signal box – the ground storey of the rectangular projection. The first reference to such a structure on the hill is in January 1792, when a report to the States from the Defence Committee included 'Herket (Mont Urbé)' as part of a planned chain of signal boxes around the island (Herket referring to 'Her quantin', a man-shaped stone in the field). However, there is evidence that the promontory had been used for this purpose since much earlier. One of the large blocks of granite built into the tower's foundations at the south-west corner of the hexagonal projection has been beautifully inscribed with a rose compass, with the date 1644.

In 1809, J. Stead described the signal box as 'a neat convenient dwelling, with a good garden: a small but excellent retreat for a weather-beaten seaman: his Yards and Rigging remain and he is still able to show his Colours: his Birth [berth] is amply furnished, his supply of Fresh Provision and Grog is certain; he may enjoy all the Conveniences of the shore and all the Amusements of the Sea, without the Dangers attending on the profession' – an engaging if probably idealised description.

The Nicolle family, who gave the tower its current name, join the story in 1821, when Philippe Nicolle acquired the field in which the signal box stood. They were a local family: a Philippe Nicolle had been Constable of the parish of St Clement's from 1763-1770, and it is likely that it was his son who bought the plot in 1821. The sale deeds also refer to Philippe's intention 'de bâtir un édifice' (construct a building). Certainly, Godfrey's map of 1849 shows a 'Look-out' with today's double footprint and it seems safe to assume that Philippe carried out his intention to build soon after 1821, converting signal box into elegant folly and prospect tower, by adding a hexagonal projection and an extra storey to both parts, with pointed windows in the very latest Gothic Revival style. The signal box area was used to insert a staircase. It has been suggested that the tower was inspired by La Tour d'Auvergne or Prince's Tower, built on the mound of La Hougue Bie in the 1780s (but demolished in 1924). Its architect is unknown, although polygonal buildings were very popular and the design may equally have borrowed features from the pattern books that were by now in wide circulation, as architects such as Batty Langley published their designs so that other could copy them. Even so, considerable skill was required to execute such elaborate designs successfully and a likely candidate for the builder of the tower is one R.E. Norman, a 'Mâitre Carpentier' active in Jersey in the early 19th century and described one of the best architects the island had produced.

During restoration, it was found that crenellations (or battlements) had been added to roof. The tower passed to Philippe's daughter after his death, who married Philippe Anley from whom the tower derived its alternative name of La Folie Anley. Perhaps it was this Philippe who added the crenellations.

The final phase of the tower's construction came during the German Occupation of Jersey (1940-5) when the third storey was added, infilling the battlements and adding a pitched roof and characteristic observation slits. It was regarded as an important lookout and there is a dug-out just to the south of the tower. In 2001, a Landmarker left the following entry in the Logbook in the tower:

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'For military buffs and as a retired gunner, I can confirm that the bedroom was used as an Observation Point for Coastal Batteries. The ceiling is marked Nord, Sud, Ost, West and the wall marks are bearings in miles in groups of 400, starting at the left hand side at 2000 miles and progressing round to 6400 miles (i.e. North) and then starting again at 400 miles. Once they understand the sequence the marks are easy to identify. The purpose of the marks would have been that the observer could have immediately given a rough bearing to a target without recourse to a compass. He would probably have had a range finder up there also, allowing him to give a bearing and range to the coastal batteries, on a radio, without delay. What is of interest to us who now sleep in the Observation Point is that it was never used for offensive purposes, as no targets were ever engaged by the coastal batteries during the German Occupation.'

LANDMARK'S RESTORATION

The Landmark Trust acquired Nicolle Tower in 1982, after becoming specially incorporated in Jersey to allow it, as a company, to own property on the island (a privilege denied non-resident individuals by Channel Island law). Its owner, Mr Vincent Obbard had recently inherited the tower from his father, Jurat Commander E. C. Obbard, and could see no other way of preserving this, the last of such towers which once dotted the island. The tower had stood empty since the war and was derelict and vandalised; the windows were boarded up, the first floor partly burned. No early photos or sketches survived of the building and nothing remained of the interior decoration to guide the restoration, which therefore tried to emulate the manner of a good provincial architect such as might have directed its original construction, while at the same time retaining the evidence of its differing uses.

First the render was stripped away to reveal the brick core. The southeast wall was found to be unstable and had to be rebuilt and window arches were strengthened. A new window was created on the ground floor in the staircase wing, where there had been a false door. The crenellations of the original two-storey building were clearly apparent below the Germans' additional storey, before the whole was re-covered in a lime-based render (lime allows the building to breath better than more modern equivalents). The roof had been covered in imitation tiles of rubberised felt which were beginning to perish and so these were stripped and replaced with new Portmadoc slates. The finial is of hardwood covered in protective lead.

Inside, crumbling plaster and damaged or rotten timber was removed. New pine floorboards were laid on the first two storeys and the walls were waterproofed and replastered. On the first floor, where the sitting room was to be, decorative architraves to the window embrasures and a dado rail were added. The fanlight over the door from the hall to the kitchen was based on a surviving fragment of the original. All the doors were renewed. The top floor presented particular difficulties. Special planning permission allowed the windows to remain unchanged (as this was not to be a permanent residence) but the wooden floor had to be removed to allow sufficient headroom, leaving the bare concrete beneath. The doorway, only two feet wide, was widened. The new staircase was extended to the third floor (previously reached only by a ladder) and there was just space to insert a bathroom on the top floor landing. In this way, Nicolle Tower has been returned to the purpose for which it was originally intended, the pursuit of pleasure on this island hilltop.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Nicolle Tower sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.