

The Landmark Trust

THE OLD PARSONAGE, IFFLEY, OXFORD

A house connected with the church has stood on the site of Iffley Rectory (as it was known for most of its history) for a very long time - possibly indeed from the date of the church's foundation in the 12th century. Furthermore the building as it exists today is one of only two or three parsonages in Oxfordshire of which there is a substantial amount surviving from before the Reformation of the mid-16th century.

The image conjured up by the Old Parsonage is of a continuous succession of gentle and learned parsons writing their sermons in the panelled drawing room, with a soothing view of the river down the long garden, past the venerable mulberry tree. If they needed inspiration they had only to look up at the text from the Vulgate inscribed as a frieze - above their heads:

'For we know that, if our earthly house and tabernacle were destroyed, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens; (2 Corinthians 5:1) I will walk in my house with a perfect heart (Psalms 101:2)..

Inevitably the truth is not so simple. Certainly in 1475 it was described as the house "wherein the parish priest hath been used to dwell", and dwell there he probably did for most of the Middle Ages. For most of the 19th century, too, it was a parsonage in the regular sense. But for long periods in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the house was let to entirely unclerical gentlemen, who rented the land or "rectorial estate". The vicar meanwhile was probably living comfortably in an Oxford college. Some of them, to be fair, rode out to perform parochial duties themselves. More often they paid a curate to do this for them. Out of his small salary the curate would find himself lodgings, sometimes in the village, sometimes not. The presence of a priest at the heart of the village was by no means to be taken for granted, and it was a lucky parish that enjoyed this privilege, then as now.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BUILDING'S HISTORY

Iffley Rectory is now divided in two. Only the northern half, owned by the Landmark Trust and called the Old Parsonage, is open today. The southern half is still the Rectory, the home of the Vicar of Iffley and his family. For historical purposes, however, the two halves will be described as one building.

The main range of Iffley Rectory runs from north to south, with a staircase tower on the north-east corner, and a larger wing at the south-east. The building divides naturally into two separate halves - a great advantage when restoration began in 1979. Of these the southern is the older, and the more complex, while the northern contains the finer rooms. The south end contains the walls of a small stone hall of the 13th century. In the late 14th century, apparently, a timber-framed second storey was added to these. Slightly later again a solar wing was added on the east, with an arch-braced roof. In one wall are curious carved stone fragments of the 13th century, reassembled and possibly imported from the church.

Traces of other structures have been found to the north of this small house, some of them dating back to the 12th century, but the north end in its present form did not exist before about 1500. Its fine rooms, with their mullioned windows and wide fireplaces, were clearly intended to form the principal living quarters. The service rooms were in the south end, which now had new floors, and walls rebuilt in stone.

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The Tudor rooms of the north end were altered in small ways over the following centuries. The sitting room has a late 16th-century moulded plaster ceiling; the ground floor rooms are lined with 17th-century panelling (this does not fit very well, and may only have been brought here in the 19th century). Upstairs there are 18th-century fireplaces. On the staircase is a piece of stained glass on which is inscribed "William Moore new leded ye window 1753". Soon after this, however, the Rectory suffered a period of neglect, because in 1790 it was declared unfit for habitation.

It remained in this state for another 30 years. Not until 1819/20 were improvements carried out by a new vicar, Rev. Edward Marshall, who happened also to hold the lease of the Rectory. A two-storey corridor was added on the east, to make communication between the two halves of the building easier. A hall was made in part of the dining room, which meant reducing the width of the windows, but they were made deeper instead. The inscriptions from the Vulgate in the sitting room may date from this time, or they could date from 1857/8, when J.C. Buckler was employed to carry out improvements to the service quarters, forming a new kitchen and sculleries, with a new housekeeper's sitting room and bedroom.

Alterations in the 20th century, before the restoration of 1979-80, consist of the little oriel window above the garden door; the replacement of Stonesfield slates by tiles in 1953; and a new kitchen and larger windows at the south end in 1960.

RESTORATION OF THE OLD PARSONAGE

The Landmark Trust bought Iffley Rectory in 1979 from the Church Commissioners, with a view of carrying out essential repairs and combine continued use by the church alongside use as a Landmark let. Architect Philip Jebb drew up plans for a small and manageable house for the vicar next to the church, while the north end became holiday accommodation, so generating income for its maintenance.

To make the alteration possible the 19th-century corridors and porch were stripped off the east side of the house. This had the additional advantage of returning the north end to its Tudor proportions, and revealing the two great chimneystacks. To complete the division only one door, on the ground floor, had to be blocked. The Landmark was to be entered from the lane, so that the new Rectory would have its own private courtyard. To make the new entrance, a window in the staircase tower was turned into a door, using the stone surround from the demolished 1850s porch, which had also opened onto the lane.

The east wall, where the corridors had been, was repaired and repointed. Part of a Tudor window was found on the first floor, between the chimneys, and this was reinstated. On the west (garden) front, the two blocked lights of the sitting room window were reopened. The dining room window had to be left as it was, however, because of the partition that had been inserted in 1820 to form the garden hall. This garden hall was in fact the only place where a kitchen could be fitted without spoiling the appearance of the two main rooms.

In the dining room some of the panelling had been removed by the last vicar, and this was now put back in position. The floorboards in the dining room are old, but a new elm floor was laid in the sitting room. Upstairs, partitions for two bedrooms and a bathroom were rearranged so that they did not cut across the windows. A new landing was formed at the top of the stairs, lined with a mixture of old and new panelling. In the attics, a further bedroom was made, where a window found in the north gable enjoys a distant and romantic view of the spires of Oxford.

The Landmark Trust is a charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Old Parsonage sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk