

# The Landmark Trust

## PEAKE'S HOUSE, COLCHESTER, ESSEX

The house that is now called Peake's House is named after the generous neighbour who bought it when it was in dire need of rescue, and gave it to the Colchester Borough Council. But it has a long and complex history. You approach it now along a street that in the late 14th century was called Calayse Street; by 1692 it was Bear Lane (from an inn on the corner of the High Street), and by 1748 it was St Martin's Lane. It seems to have become East Stockwell Street by 1841: the Stock Well was a notable watering place for cattle, horses and sheep.

At one time the site on which Peake's House stands held three houses: 30, 31 and 32 East Stockwell Street. Of the three, 31 and 32 were a single dwelling, an early hall house. Number 32, built in the late 14th century, was the oldest part: this house contained the service area and the screens passage to the hall, which stood on the site of 31 (where the drawing room and main bedroom are now). The service area comprised a buttery and pantry, where wet and dry foods were stored. The cooking was done either in the hall or in a detached kitchen in the back yard. In the 15th century a west wing, containing a parlour, was added behind 32, and to the north of it a small wing was built in the 17th century, for use either as a new hall or perhaps as an attached kitchen. Later on, this wing was extended to form an extra room. With the extensions, 31 and 32 formed a three-sided building surrounding what is now our garden. (Now, however, the whole of 32 has disappeared, demolished in 1935 and replaced by our car parking space.)

The hall on the site of 31 was rebuilt, or remodelled, in about 1550, and was converted into the present three-storied house, with the hall replaced by the present sitting room and bedroom. This may have been a new parlour block, but it seems more likely that the building became a separate entity used as a shop or commercial premises with living and sleeping quarters above. It may have been at this time that 31 and 32 became separate houses, and if they were separately owned the businessman's (or shopkeeper's) family would have needed extra accommodation upstairs. If our main bedroom was their living room, this may explain the generously sized fireplace, with its stylised plaster flower.

Next door, another separate house – our number 30 – had already been put up, possibly by the same craftsmen that built the hall house, in about 1500 or soon afterwards; it seems to have been linked to 31 by new brickwork in the early 17th century, when the chimney stack was built. This is the house that now contains our front door, together with the kitchen, bathroom and twin bedroom. It also has a large cellar with a generous ceiling height, making it a useful working space below ground. This would not have been necessary for structural purposes (many such houses were built straight on to the ground with a brick plinth only a few courses high). Perhaps it was used for manufacturing whatever was sold on the floor above: to use a cellar in this way not only saved ground space but also provided security for stocks and tools.

The three houses seem to have changed very little until the early 20th century. In 1903 Mr J Burnby opened a general store in what is now our kitchen; the family later bought the freehold. In 1928, 31 and 32 were sold, possibly to Mr W. Peake, who carried on a successful business at 36 East Stockwell Street which eventually expanded into a fair-sized factory. By now all three houses were in poor condition, however, and in 1935 number 32 was pulled down, probably in the belief that it was past saving. But the tide was turning: the Colchester Civic Society was now starting to restore some of the timber-framed houses, including Peake's House (then called The Old House). In 1946 Mr Peake made a generous gift of it to the Borough Council, specifying that it was to be used for social and cultural purposes only.

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## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

Mr Peake died in 1957. In the same year Peake's House was let to the Colchester branch of the Red Cross Society, and there they stayed until fire officers pointed out that the house was, from the fire safety point of view, unsuitable as a venue for classes consisting of a number of people. Of necessity they moved out (into a house further up East Stockwell Street), and the Borough Council were faced with the need to find a new use for the house that would respect the terms of Mr Peake's stipulation that it was to be used for social and cultural purposes only. In 1994 the Council decided that, in spite of Mr Peake's wishes, it would have to be sold.

Very fortunately, the story of Peake's House came to the notice of Mrs M.J. March. Mrs March was an old friend of the Landmark Trust, and indeed had herself stayed in many Landmarks; she wrote to the Trust suggesting that this was a building that needed their attention. A suggestion was put to the Council that they should allow Landmark a 99-year lease on the property, while retaining the freehold, and this was agreed early in 1995. With generous financial help from the Council, Peake's House was repaired and restored during the following summer under the direction of Peregrine Bryant and David Hopps of Peregrine Bryant Architects, with the building work carried out by Tendring Construction of Wix.

Unusually for a Landmark, only relatively minor works were needed to make Peake's House ready for letting. In one corner of the lower bedroom there were signs of movement, so a new metal strap was fitted to secure the tie beam to the wall plate. An existing tie was supposed to hold the front of the building to the back, but was useless because at some time it had been cut; the engineer Richard Gray found a way of modifying the design to make it do its job as originally intended. The floor level in the sitting room was raised, so that one might see out of the windows. The main bedroom was open to the roof, and it was decided that the ceiling should be put back. A new kitchen was made in the old dining room, and the bathroom and the W.C. were combined, providing new airing and storage cupboards. The wiring and heating systems were renewed, and new insulation put in wherever possible.

The blacksmith made new iron hand rails for the main staircase and on the new steps up to the sitting room, as well as curtain rods with upturned ends (Landmark's favoured design) for the windows. Damaged plaster was patched with haired lime plaster, and limewash tinted with umber and yellow ochre was applied to the walls. Some new floorboards were provided in the sitting room, and new quarry tiles were laid in the back quarters. Dutch tiles were commissioned for the kitchen; in one of these, two ladies are sitting among large piles of wool – a reference to the cloth trade that brought prosperity to Colchester in the Middle Ages; perhaps one is a "parter", whose job it was to separate the finer wool from the coarser, while the other is holding what might be a spindle, so may be spinning.

Within less than six months from the start of its restoration, Peake's House was fully repaired and furnished, and it opened its doors to its first visitors in November 1995. Ever since, except for one week annually when the Borough Council opens the house to the public, Landmarkers have been able to take it for a short or long stay at any time of the year. It is an exceptional experience to spend the day exploring the city of Colchester, and then enjoy the pleasures of returning to your own medieval home at its heart.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Peake's House sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*