

SACKVILLE HOUSE, EAST GRINSTEAD, WEST SUSSEX

East Grinstead was laid out as a borough in the early part of the 13th century with its wide High Street used as a market place. It was flanked by 48 plots and each plot, known as a burgage, had a house on it with a piece of town land or 'portland' running behind it. Such plots were a key feature of medieval urban planning, maximising the number of street frontages. Their main use was to grow food for the occupants, while equally providing extra space for outbuildings and workshops. At just over 40 feet Sackville House's plot is wider than the norm (33 feet) for the town and unusually long at 630 feet. Its position nearly opposite the church was an important one. The plot is itself a rare survival, running to true to its original extent.

The ownership of a burgage conferred certain rights and privileges. For example, an owner could trade at the markets and fairs held in the market place outside their houses before non-burgage holders - thereby 'forestalling' them. The right to vote for a member of Parliament also depended on showing title to a burgage and so acquiring them became a way of exerting power and influence. It was in the 17th century that the Sackville family from nearby Knole started to actively acquire burgages and it is from this connection that the house got its name, although it doesn't appear to have been known as Sackville House until the late 19th century. It is the same Sackville family that has given its name to the almshouses, Sackville College, lying nearly opposite Sackville House.

The house was built around 1525 as a four bay continuous jetty house with the original wagon way giving access to the rear. Behind the house, and detached from it for reasons of fire safety, was probably a two bay kitchen, of which part of the last bay overlooking the garden still survives. As a continuous jetty house, the ground floor would never have been open to the roof, and it probably consisted of a two bay hall with the buttery and pantry service rooms off one end. There is no evidence of how the hall was heated, as the brick chimney stack is a later addition of 1574, the date proudly carved into fireplace lintel in the middle bedroom.

During repair works to Sackville House, the removal of tongue and groove boarding in a small washroom of the eastern bedroom, revealed extensive remains of a brocade pattern wall painting, painted in a red ochre onto the plaster panels of the stud work wall. Its position in such a small confined space is highly unusual, and it is clear that it must once have formed part of a much larger scheme for the bedroom. There are some slight remains of painted decorative patterns on a beam at the east end of the sitting room, and these, together with those visible in the bedroom, are also likely to be part of the improvements to the house towards the end of the 16th century.

Around this time, the detached kitchen range was connected to the main house and corridors where formed behind the chimney providing privacy to the bedrooms. Such changes necessitated the provision of a new staircase at the back of the front range. In a further raising of living standards, the open kitchen fire was replaced with a large inglenook hearth. The roof was raised, as it was again in about 1700 when the dormers were probably added. The roof is covered or 'healed' in the wonderfully thick Horsham stone tiles that are such a joy of this region. The front door would have been in the centre of the present sitting room wall. The final alterations, basically a rearrangement of rooms, and the insertion of hearths on the

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upper floors, and the reconstruction of the front wall of the ground floor hall house, date from the late 19th century.

The Repair and Restoration of Sackville House

In 1919, Sackville House was acquired by Geoffrey and Joan Webb from her father, Frederick Hanbury, who was Vice-Chairman of the pharmaceutical company, Allen and Hanbury. They found the house in a serious state of decay, with parts of the walls covered in dilapidated weatherboarding, and with trees allowed to grow right up against the house. They carried out a full restoration and laid out the garden.

Geoffrey Webb was a well-known stained-glass artist and he worked from a studio at the top of the house. The two roundels in the chapel were made by him. He came from an artistic family; his uncle, Aston Webb had a series of commissions of national importance - Admiralty Arch, and works to the Victoria & Albert Museum and Buckingham Palace. It was Geoffrey's daughter, Ursula, who with very great generosity, bequeathed Sackville House to the Landmark Trust at her death in 1995. She had worked tirelessly to defend the remaining portlands of East Grinstead from development, no doubt strengthened by her childhood memories of being able to ride from the garden right into Ashdown Forest without having to cross any roads.

We appointed Peregrine Bryant as our architect, and apart from building a new staircase running up from the back hall, it was felt relatively little intervention was needed in 1995. We changed the position of the existing bathroom and added two more. We also felt that the view from the back of the house was so wonderful that the end room, until then a service room, should be the kitchen. This end room and the one above it were extended by some three feet towards the garden when the Webbs moved in, and the windows that they put in were originally much higher to prevent the servants from being distracted from their work. We lowered them by the same amount again.

The bottom of the new staircase is in what was the former kitchen. To improve its appearance and headroom, we removed a steel beam from the ceiling, which is now held up through the new bathroom partition. The old flooring was replaced with hand-made tiles. In the front of the house, we made the cloakroom into one room, and in the corner of the sitting room where the family chapel is, we blocked up a doorway into the hall. The design of most of the curtains in the house is based on the wall painting discovered in the bedroom lobby. Outside we painted the walls with limewash, and rationalised the rainwater goods. The yard has been repaved in brick and York stone, and the original stone wheel tracks, said to stem from the use of the house by a coffin maker, were revealed when the modern paving was taken up.

It was Ursula Webb's brother, Father Benedict, who first wrote to the Landmark Trust saying that 'nothing would give our family more happiness than to know that the future of Sackville House is assured as a residence and with its beautiful garden intact.' We were delighted that he was the first person to stay here after our restoration, to see that his family and sister's wishes will be respected.

By 2020, the Horsham stone roof required comprehensive repair. In 2022, a major campaign of reroofing followed, when it became clear that the timber frame also needed extensive repair. Now the house is back to looking much as it always has, but once more in full good heart.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Sackville House sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk