

# The Landmark Trust

## THE WARREN HOUSE, KIMBOLTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

When The Warren House was given to Landmark by a pragmatic farmer and his wife in 2005, we were delighted to take on what we thought was an 18th-century eye-catcher for Kimbolton Castle, aligned precisely with the Duchess's bedroom in the castle. It certainly came to play that role, but we later realised that its greatest rarity lay in its survival as a timber-framed warren house, once a recognisable building type of which very few survive unaltered. As a timber-framed survival, unaltered in modern times, it is possibly unique.

Warrens were areas of land set aside from the Middle Ages onwards for rabbit husbandry. Rabbits were first imported into England around 1200 from Spain, and strange though it seems today, they were delicate creatures that needed to be nurtured and protected to survive in the English climate. They were also valuable livestock, prized for both their meat and their skins, and jealously guarded by the lord and his warrener. From these early times, warren lodges were built out on the lonely warrens to accommodate the warrener, also sometimes doubling as a hunting lodge. Rabbits thrive especially in light, well-drained soils and the area of East Anglia known as the Brecklands, further east from Kimbolton, became one of the earliest and longest standing concentrations of rabbit breeding. The few surviving medieval warren lodges are found there. They are massive stone and flint structures, all ruinous today.

Warren houses tend to share a broad typology: tall two-storey, single-chamber structures built in lonely and commanding spots, often south-facing since rabbits prefer warmer slopes. They had one or more fireplaces, a very early date for such features, and were well provided with windows for surveying the surrounding countryside, with a well nearby. The ground floor was often strengthened or fortified, since it was here that valuable carcasses and pelts were stored. A spiral stair, often in the south-west corner, led to the first floor, where the warrener lived.

It will be immediately apparent that the Kimbolton Warren House shares most, if not all, of these characteristics. The earliest (if slightly ambiguous) reference to a Kimbolton warren is in 1373. However, the original little timber-framed, single-chamber cottage dates not from the Middle Ages but from the revival of interest in rabbit farming that took place in the first half of the 17th century. The Warren House is not shown on an estate map of 1582, but does appear on one from 1673. Tree-ring analysis sadly failed to provide a construction date, but a largely illegible document among the Manchester papers dated 1637 giving the accounts for 'Your Honour's improvements on the heath' provides a highly plausible construction date.

The Warren House has always been associated with Kimbolton Castle and its place in full view on the escarpment made it ideal to bring into service for the 4th (or possibly 5th) Duke of Manchester's enhancement of his park under the advice of Joseph Spence. The greatest 18th-century architects, Sir John Vanbrugh, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Thomas Archer and Robert Adam all contributed to the castle's magnificence that we see today, and it seemed highly likely in prospect that one of them might have been responsible for designing the elegant stone and brick façade that now dresses the humble warrener's cottage. The full footprint, complete with porch, is clear on an estate map of 1763. In fact, we have found no firm evidence of the involvement of any of these architects, or of an explicit link with the similar lodge, Priory Cottage, which stands to the east of The Warren House. A drawing showing alternative options for the frontage of a lodge in the Manchester Papers at the Huntingdon

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Record Office provides circumstantial links with the *office* of Robert Adam; it is in the same bundle of documents, and on the same paper, as the drawings Adam did for his work on the gatehouse and castle from the 1760s. It may equally relate to a refurbishment as much as original construction of the lodge.

Despite its new role as picturesque eye-catcher, our analysis of The Warren House provided no evidence at all of any polite use internally. It seems it remained a humble gamekeeper's cottage. It achieved fame of sorts by appearing in the *London Illustrated News* in the 1880s and may have operated as a hunting lodge for late-Victorian shooting parties. It continued to be lived in as an estate cottage until after the War (despite also being requisitioned by American airmen who used the airbase that was created on the plateau behind in the 1940s). Eventually, its lack of services and remoteness led to its abandonment, leading to dereliction, partial collapse and vandalism. Sold by the Manchester estate to the Boots Pension Fund in 1975, the Fund twice applied for permission to demolish it due to the cost of repair, and it was only thanks to local lobbying with the help of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Ancient Monuments Society that the lodge survived. The Fund carried out some repairs in the 1980s, rebuilding the parapet, re-roofing, demolishing the outshot to the rear and putting pebbledash on the exterior. This at least stabilised the building.

In 1997, The Warren House was bought with surrounding farmland by Mr and Mrs Convine. In 2005, they generously gave Landmark the building and access to it. It was a number of years before The Warren House came to the top of Landmark's project list, but work finally began in summer 2011. The rear extension, demolished in the 1980s, was rebuilt in hempcrete, a building material that combines hemp fibre with hydraulic lime to produce environmentally friendly, breathable, highly insulating fabric. This extension has an entrance lobby and bathroom on the ground floor, and kitchen and store on the first floor.

The building was re-roofed and the upper courses of the porch and chimney-stack rebuilt. Inside, the restoration was guided by The Warren House's former use as a warrener's or gamekeeper's dwelling. A small window was introduced to the bedroom on the ground floor (which originally had no windows). The hearth has been enlarged to its original dimensions and a spiral staircase has been reconstructed in oak in the original position of the stairs. The façade, certainly planted onto the timber frame at a later date, was tied back in and stabilised. The Warren House's future is now secure, to see and be seen within the landscape.

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