

The Landmark Trust

THE WHITE HOUSE, ASTON MUNSLOW, SHROPSHIRE

Until 1946, the White House was the home of the Stedman family, who had lived there in nearly unbroken continuity since the Middle Ages. At one period, in the 19th century, the house was let to tenants. At the same time descent through the female line meant a change of name to Stedman-Smith and then to Farmer. Members of the family still visit the house.

Period 1 ?13th century - Miss Purser used to talk of the White House as four-houses-in-one. The earliest of these survives only in shadow, in the cellar of the Elizabethan cross-wing. It is possible that stonework here belongs to the undercroft of a much earlier wing, perhaps even dating from the 13th century. This is thought to be the date of the ruined dovecote in the garden, so there must have been a manor house on the site then, of which all other traces have disappeared.

Phase 2 14th century - The earliest part of the house still standing is contained in the long wing which runs from east to west along the side of the hill. This is a cruck hall, in which the main trusses are formed from two great curved timbers rising from ground level and meeting at the top. These appear mysteriously in the rooms on the first floor, but the full sequence of trusses can best be seen by peering into the roof space.

Originally there was an open hall, divided by a central cruck truss (now to be seen against the chimney of the hall bedroom) into two bays, with a two-storey service bay at the east end. In the north and south walls at the eastern end of the hall were two entrance doors opposite one another. The passage between these two doors was divided from the main body of the hall by a spere truss. Two great free-standing posts supporting a collar beam narrowed the hall at this point, and braces running from each post to the collar formed an arched entrance to it. Usually there was some sort of moveable screen standing between the posts, to keep the worst of the draughts from those within. This building has been dated to the early 14th century, and Miss Purser suggested that it was the work of Roger Stedman, described as "of Aston" in 1335. There was no chimney in the hall at this stage, only a central hearth. The smoke from this gathered in the roofspace, before escaping through a special opening, or louvre, in the ridge, evidence for which survives.

Phase 3 Late 16th /early 17th century - Towards the end of the 16th century, in the Elizabethan period, a new timber-framed wing was built at the west end of this hall, probably replacing the earlier wing. This now contains the History Room, the smaller sitting room and the rooms above. It is box-framed and, curiously, was built as a self-contained structure, although there were always doors between wing and hall.

Soon afterwards, in the early 1600s, a great remodelling of the hall range took place. Its timber-framed walls were cased in stone. The hall (now the dining room) was provided with a fireplace, whose chimney occupied the space between the central and spere trusses. At the same time a floor was inserted to form an upper chamber, the hall bedroom. This was reached by a new stair, with typical Jacobean flat balusters, rising from beside a new entrance door. Later on, the chimney was enlarged to its present huge size, to provide a new kitchen fireplace. Slightly later again, a lean-to dairy was added at the east end.

Phase 4 Late 18th century - The next, and last, phase occurred between 1780 and 1800, supposedly after a fire. The cross-wing was extended westwards to provide a new drawing room, staircase hall and main bedroom. Across the southern end of new and old work a stuccoed Georgian front was added, with a central door and symmetrical windows, so that from the outside,

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it all appears as one. Changes of level inside, and sections of box-framing, give clues of a richer and more complex history, whose trail was eagerly followed by Miss Purser.

THE WHITE HOUSE - Miss Purser's Museum

Between 1966 and 1986 there flourished at the White House a Museum of Buildings and Country Life. Started by Miss Constance Purser, who had moved there with her parents in 1947, it ran on enthusiasm and voluntary help for twenty years before its founder, by then in her eighties, felt unable to carry on.

The house itself, with its outbuildings, formed the heart, of the exhibition. The structure was carefully labelled, so that visitors could distinguish the trusses of the 14th century cruck hall from the Elizabethan timber-framing. The high point of the tour was the view into the roof-space, through a trap door, where the medieval building could be most fully appreciated.

To this a variety of agricultural and domestic implements was added, starting with a small display in the dairy and gradually extending into every corner of the property. In Miss Purser's words, these served to illustrate "the unchanging simplicity of an unselfconscious rural life", and also the inventiveness and skill of our forebears, who made them and used them. Only implements which research showed to have been used at the White House in the past were accepted, many of them given by local people.

Miss Purser and her Helpers set themselves the highest standards, both of conservation and display. A full catalogue of all accessions was kept, and every item was checked in the workshop, to see whether it needed attention. Expeditions were made to other museums, to learn from their methods. Guides were given particular areas to read up, so that there was always someone able to answer questions about some aspect of the museum's collection. At the same time the White House Museum had the special character of all amateur enterprises, where as much as possible is home-made, and therefore reflects the personality and interests of its makers.

Choosing a successor for this very individual enterprise was not easy. Eventually Miss Purser decided on the Landmark Trust, as a charity that specialises in the care and maintenance of historic buildings by making them available for people to stay in for holidays. Landmark would not be able to run the White House as a museum, but Miss Purser had always felt very strongly that it was first and foremost a home. This aspect of her wishes would certainly be fulfilled: the White House now becomes home for a short time to a succession of different families and groups of people. Miss Purser transferred the White House and all its contents to the Landmark Trust in 1990, and after minor repairs and redecoration, it received its first visitors in 1991.

Most of the agricultural machinery had already been dispersed from Miss Purser's collection before the Landmark Trust took over, but items in the cider house are largely intact, as is the stable, complete with Captain, the life size model cart horse. The collection of implements in the middle of the barn is also largely complete.

In furnishing the house for use, the displays which filled some of the rooms were of necessity cleared away. Many objects have been absorbed around the building, however, and small displays have been reassembled in the dairy and kitchen, so that its overall character remains very much the one that Miss Purser created. Above all, the History Room has been put together to act as a reminder on a small scale of the museum as a whole in Miss Purser's time, and of her achievement.

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