

# The Landmark Trust

## WOODSFORD CASTLE

The Woodsford Castle we see today dates from 1370 - 90, and was probably added to an existing group of buildings. In 1335 William de Whitefield, then lord of Woodsford, was granted a licence to "crenellate the dwelling place of his manor" - in today's terms, planning permission to fortify his house. We don't know whether he actually did this, because so much of the castle has disappeared. However, this was a time of unrest leading up to the outbreak of the Hundred Years War with France in 1337. Many of those living near the South Coast felt the need to strengthen their defences against possible raids, and it is likely that William de Whitefield did the same.

By 1370 Woodsford had a new owner who was more closely linked to state affairs. In 1367 it had been bought by a great magnate, Sir Guy de Bryan. Sir Guy was a close friend of King Edward III, and held a number of important posts from Steward of the Royal Household and Keeper of the Great Seal, to Ambassador to the French court, and Admiral of the Western Fleet. In 1370 he was made a Knight of the Garter. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 200 years later, he was still remembered by the historian William Camden as a famous warrior. Camden describes Woodsford as the place where Sir Guy had a "little castle of his own".

We do not know whether Sir Guy rebuilt the whole castle, but it is likely that all he did was add to it what is really a very grand apartment block. All the evidence shows that although the existing building was only one side of a quadrangle, the other three sides were much less substantial. There was a gatehouse opposite the present main door, and towers at the corners, linked by walls with smaller buildings against them. Traces of these could still be seen in the 1780s, and they are shown on a map of about the same date.

A medieval castle had to accommodate a number of different households. The chief of these was that of the lord himself. Guy de Bryan's main estates were in Devon, so he would not have visited Woodsford very often, but the best chambers would have been kept for him and his family. Then there was the Constable, the only full-time resident, who would have had his own set of rooms. Lesser officials, and the garrison, would each have had their own lodging. There would also be rooms for guests, varying in status according to the status of the lord himself - and at Woodsford they could have been of the very highest, as recorded in the traditional names of the rooms. What we have at Woodsford is one main apartment (now the Landmark), consisting of the King's Room, the Queen's Room, the chapel, and rooms in the adjoining towers. In spite of the names, it is likely that this was for Sir Guy himself. At the south end is a slightly less grand apartment, probably for the Constable. It has a main room and, again, rooms in a now vanished tower. Each of these two had its own kitchen on the ground floor. Between them are two smaller lodgings.

After Guy de Bryan's death Woodsford passed by inheritance to the Stafford family and then, around 1500, to the Strangways, who later became Earls of Ilchester. In 1630 the castle was in ruins, but about 1660, the main range was transformed into a very large farmhouse, tamed by the addition of a thatched roof. Floors were inserted above the King's Room and the chapel, with new windows. Barns and lean-to buildings, all thatched, clustered round the walls. A wing was added on the north-west corner in the 1790s, and an attic floor above the Kings Room.

In 1850 a thorough and most scholarly restoration was carried out under the supervision of John Hicks of Dorchester. The builder was a Mr Hardy, whose son, Thomas, later joined Hicks' office to train as an architect before later finding fame as an author and poet. It is even possible that Hicks first met Thomas at Woodsford. Thereafter, Woodsford was once more a house of some status, centre of a large tenant farm. 120 years later another round of repairs was needed, and in 1977 the

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castle was sold to the Landmark Trust - the first time in 600 years it had changed hands except by inheritance.

## **RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST**

When the Landmark Trust bought Woodsford Castle in 1977, the great thatched roof was in danger of collapse. The most urgent task was therefore to make the building safe and watertight. The whole of the main roof was rethatched, and in several places the roof structure was completely renewed. As part of the same operation, chimneys were repaired, and one chimney over the great kitchen fireplace rebuilt; and the walls were repointed where necessary.

Because the castle was still lived in by tenants little more could be done at that time. Ten years later, however, the tenants moved out and a second stage of repair could begin, this time inside the building. The intention was to return Sir Guy de Bryan's grand apartment to something approaching its original arrangement, a task which was completed in 1992. A great deal of work was involved, most of it carried out, with only occasional help, by one man, Leonard Hardy, under the supervision of Caroe and Partners, the architects.

Before any repair could begin, it was necessary to strip out the many later accretions, in order to learn more about the building. Plaster was removed, walls and floors opened up, and most significant, the floor in the King's Room taken away, so as to revealing its earlier and true proportions. This exercise revealed much about the original construction of the castle, and its varied history, not least that the restoration of 1850 was much more extensive than we had supposed.

It was felt that, with respect to our medieval forebears, the vaulted ground floor was not the best place for a modern kitchen. These rooms were simply limewashed, their stone paving repaired, and, like the rooms at the south end, left open for visitors to explore. Instead, the kitchen, with bathrooms and extra bedrooms, would go into the pleasant 18th-century wing. Here floors were taken out at the northern end to allow space for a new staircase, and the windows, with the panelled linings of the window reveals, were repaired and renewed.

In the King's Room the removal of modern and Victorian plaster revealed surviving areas of thin medieval plaster; this has been left in place, and the surrounding areas replastered in fine lime plaster to an equal thickness. At the same time as the removal of the floor, some 18th-century first floor windows were blocked up, and surviving remnants of earlier windows repaired. This enabled us to repair the heads of the medieval windows and to build, in new Purbeck stone, arches on the inner faces so as to reinstate their embrasures. All the windows have been reglazed with lead lights. The new oak ceiling follows the marks left in the walls by the medieval roof

In the chapel, substantial remains of the very fine east window were found, blocked up in the 18th century by the present wooden casements. The reveals of the casements have been rebuilt neatly, and the infill wall consolidated before replastering in lime to reveal the line and remnants of the medieval window. There was a temptation to remove the inserted floor altogether, but this was resisted. It seemed equally important to leave some evidence of Woodsford's later history, and the way in which it had been altered over the years. A new staircase was built to give access to the upper floor, however. In the Queen's Room a new floor of Purbeck stone flags was laid, over the top of the vault below. We have left a small time capsule under one of them.

The surroundings of the castle were greatly improved when the farm buildings in the adjoining field to the east were cleared away. Further landscape works were carried out, and new trees planted, so that the castle can once again stand against a wooded background, as old photographs show it to have done in the past. In 2008 a major re-thatching campaign was undertaken, of what is the largest thatched in Dorset.

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