

The Landmark Trust

BELMONT, LYME REGIS, DORSET

Belmont was built in its current form around 1784. The house encases an earlier, small two-storey look-out pavilion of blue lias ashlar, almost certainly the structure then known as Bunter's Castle. The plot is an important one, on the corner where the main road out of town to Sidmouth meets Cobb Road. Cobb Road was built around 1756 as a toll road by one of the Coades, an Exeter and Lyme Baptist family active in various parts of the wool business. Around 1783, the lease of the Belmont plot (it was owned by the Town Corporation of Lyme) passed to Samuel Coade, a fuller, who transferred the lease to his niece Eleanor Coade in 1784. It is not entirely clear whether Samuel or Eleanor built Belmont, but it became a three-dimensional catalogue for Eleanor Coade's artificial stone, produced at her thriving manufactory in Lambeth. The left hand head of Amphritite, the sea goddesses above the front windows, is inscribed '1785, J. Brabham fecit' which confirms the construction date. As built, Belmont would have appeared like a pretty, pocket-sized country house, sitting proud above the Cobb surrounded by park railings and paddocks.

Mrs Eleanor Coade (1733-1821) was the first of three remarkable inhabitants of Belmont. Never marrying, she bought the artificial stone manufactory in London, near the south bank of Westminster Bridge, in 1769 as a failing concern. She turned it into a thriving business. She employed a team of the finest sculptors and craftsmen of her day to produce an artificial fired stone that she succeeded in marketing as actively better than natural stone for durability and reliability. By mixing pre-fired stoneware and ground glass, flint and silicates into raw ball clay, shrinkage was carefully controlled. Coade stone became a hugely successful product, used by all the great architects of the day. Though mainly living in London, Mrs Coade retained ownership of Belmont for the rest of her life. The leasehold was then bought by a Mrs Fewtrell, who first called it Belmont. She was followed by various tenants until 1881, when the house was bought by a GP, Dr Richard Bangay (1834-1933). Bangay had a remarkable life. He began life as a crow scarer, and educated himself while working in a coal mine to qualify as a doctor.

Bangay moved to Lyme from Cheadle near Manchester in search of a better climate for his wife Agnes. They had a large family and Dr Bangay became well loved in Lyme. He extended Belmont considerably: he added two large gabled wings, erected conservatories across the back of the house and built the three-storey observatory tower. Astronomy was increasingly popular in the 19th century and Dr Bangay was a lifelong enthusiast. The Bangays left Lyme in 1896, selling the house to the Cooper family, who owned it until 1959 when it was bought by Dr & Mrs Raynham, the old house by now somewhat dilapidated. Largely absent, the Raynhams turned the west conservatory into a flat and knocked down most of Dr Bangay's extensions. The house was by now listed Grade II*, because of its Coade connection. In 1969, still in need of work, the house was bought by the author, John Fowles, and his wife Elizabeth, who moved from Underhill Farm just outside Lyme where they had lived since 1965.

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John Fowles is a writer of global fame, author of such works as *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for which he finalised the proofs in his writing room on the first floor at Belmont and where he wrote many other works. They completed Belmont's refurbishment, and Fowles, a keen naturalist, revelled in its large if overgrown garden. He also loved local history, and from 1979 to 1989 was curator of the Lyme Regis Museum, and archivist until 1999, writing many of the labels for the exhibits.

Elizabeth Fowles died in 1990. In 1998, Fowles married again, to Sarah Smith. By now in his seventies, Fowles was concerned for Belmont's future. He especially wished to avoid the house becoming a hotel and wanted it to be available to other writers. Failing to find an academic university willing to take it on, he approached Landmark. The trust was willing to take it as a bequest, but in the event it was found this was not the case. Sarah Fowles offered it to Landmark to buy, which we do not normally do but a generous legacy from Joyce Hanson, another Dorset resident, enabled Landmark to buy Belmont. Each year, two free study weeks are offered to creative writing students from the University of East Anglia in pursuance of John Fowles's wishes.

Belmont was by now again in need of major maintenance works. The Fowles' works had been somewhat pragmatic, often using inappropriate modern materials. The late 19th-century extensions were by now just two rooms, with awkward changes of levels internally and PVC windows. After very careful building analysis, it was decided to return the house to its original Regency form, removing the late 19th-century remnants. A detailed restoration scheme was drawn up based on careful analysis and old photos; necessary permissions were obtained. Restoration lasted from late 2013-2015.

The later extensions were removed and the house entirely scaffolded. It was re-roofed, replacing the stone copings and rebuilding the front parapet and chimneys. The exposed Coade stone urns were conserved, their lids having cracked due to rusting iron dowels holding them in place. The Coade stone embellishments were all cleaned of later paint using high pressure steam, revealing remarkable detail. The external ground levels were corrected. The back lawn now reflects the size of Mrs Coade's original plot, although the rest of the garden has not been returned to the paddock it was in the 18th-century. It will remain the tangled wild life sanctuary so loved by John Fowles.

Throughout, the 18th-century floor plan has been reinstated, rebuilding partitions to the ground floor bedroom, back parlour and NE bedroom. The easy access ground floor bathroom and utility room were built on the site of similar service rooms apparent on early maps. The dimensions of the stairs have been corrected. The fenestration and cornices are all primary. One original fireplace remained entire, now reinstated in its original position in the first floor drawing room. Like the friezes and architraves in the house, its decoration is also Coade stone, the remarkable detail of the central medallion left unpainted. Fragments of two other fireplaces allowed reproductions to be created for the other rooms, made by Landmark's furnishing team, who used resin to create the decoration from moulds of the original.

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