

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2014

The Work of The Landmark Trust.

At the May meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Caroline Stanford gave a fascinating illustrated talk on The Work of the Landmark Trust.

Caroline explained that the Trust, which has its Head Office at Shottesbrooke, was a 'charity of last resort'. It exists to rescue significant historic buildings that are at risk, and having carried out restoration work, give those buildings a new and secure future by offering them to anyone to use for self-catering holidays. The Trust has to raise funds to restore and convert the buildings for their new use as a Landmark, but the holiday lettings then pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the buildings.

The Trust had been formed in 1965 by John and Christian Smith, as he had been outraged by the demolition of some lock keeper's cottages. Initially the restoration work was funded by the Manifold Trust, but is now entirely funded by direct donations to the Trust. Although it works closely with the National Trust, it is a totally separate organisation - often taking on buildings that the National Trust would consider too risky for the National Trust. There are currently 196 properties in England Scotland and Wales, (with a few in Italy and France), and almost a third of them are Grade I or Grade II* listed of architectural interest. The Landmark Trust has a team of 400 property managers, as well as housekeepers and gardeners, who look after the sites, and a special furnishing team based in the Cotswolds, as well as a staff of 30 at Head Office.

It can take several years to rescue and restore a Landmark. A building that is to be acquired has to be in some way significant - although not necessarily grand - that would have no future unless the Trust intervened. It must be somewhere that would educate and bring pleasure to their visitors and be in a location that visitors would find pleasant to spend a holiday. Caroline showed some examples from the wide range - including an 18th century villa in Scotland, a water tower on the Sandringham Estate, Langley Gatehouse in Shropshire, Ty Capel (a former chapel in a Denbighshire slate mining community), and one at Robin Hood's bay in North Yorkshire that from the outside looks like a Greek temple or grand Georgian church, but was actually built in the 1870s as a pigsty!!

The philosophy of the Trust is to repair the building before renewal, and to use the highest quality repairs and materials, in the process supporting the traditional skills used in its construction. They avoid conjecture, but will sometimes remove later additions, or reverse changes made during a building's history. The setting is important, but 'the building' comes first (so in a few cases 'modern facilities' are located close by, rather than make unsympathetic alterations to the Landmark itself. The Trust helps to perpetuate old skills, such as making papier mâché ceilings, reconstructing medieval roof trusses, or the craft of a stonemason. All the furnishings are done by the Trust, and are specific to the particular building - such as an Arts and Crafts style dining room in a Lutyens house. The Causeway House on Hadrian's Wall is an old farmhouse that is provided with 'sweet beds with canopies' - not just 'appropriate', but as the bedroom is open to the heather thatched roof, gives protection from any falling twigs!. To help keep visitors warm, this particular Landmark is also provided with heated duvets. Each house is also stocked with carefully chosen books 'as if filled by a well-read friend', and a history album. The latter - including much local knowledge - records the story of the property, including the work done by the Trust, and draws on the extensive research done before the restoration work is started.

Having brought the buildings back into use, the Trust lets them to visitors. The aim is to achieve the maximum occupancy, but they are also, as a charity, bound to make the best return possible on their

assets. The first Landmark that Sir John Smith rescued, Church Cottage in Cardiganshire for example, costs from £12 per person per night, whilst the Cloth Fair in Smithfield, London, costs up to £98 per person per night - and Caroline showed a wide range in between, including the Pineapple House in Scotland, Tixall Gatehouse in Staffordshire and Wortham Manor in Cornwall. The Trust also runs Lundy, a granite outcrop island in the Bristol Channel. This was bought by the National Trust in 1968, but as they were unsure what to do with it, Sir John arranged for the Landmark Trust to take it on a 99 year lease. There are around 20 buildings - from a castle keep to a lighthouse keeper's cottage - which visitors can stay in.

Caroline also showed a number of examples of the transformation the Trust had achieved. Possibly the oldest property in their collection, Purton Green in Suffolk dates from the mid 13th century. When the Trust bought it in 1969 it was a derelict ruin, but the rare scissor braced great hall has been fully restored. The medieval village it was once part of has disappeared, and it now stands in the middle of fields - to preserve its setting, visitors have to leave their car a couple of hundred yards away, and trundle their luggage to the house in the wheelbarrow provided. A much newer building is Goddards, at Abinger Common in Surrey. It was designed by Edwin Lutyens, who promoted the Arts and Crafts movement, for the wealthy Mirrielees family, as a rest home for 'gentle ladies of small means'. It was laid out in a horse-shoe shape, with common rooms as well as individual small bedrooms for the residents. There was even a skittle alley, which also had an entrance from outside, so that local villagers could use it too. The garden in the courtyard was designed by Gertrude Jekyll. It was much liked by the 'gentle ladies' - Lutyens later commenting that they 'invariably weep on leaving'. It later became a family home, and the work done by the Trust included restoring the building to its original layout, as well as renovating the old chimneys etc. At Fox Hall, in West Sussex, the restoration of the 18th century hunting lodge included analysing remnants of the old paint, to match the colours, and making copies of paintings known to have been there originally. In order that the Duke would know if it was worth getting up early to go hunting, there had been a wind dial over the fireplace, and even that now works again, so visitors can check the wind direction whilst lying in bed!

More recent projects have included the Shore Cottages at Caithness - originally a row of herring fishers cottages, where the men turned to salmon fishing fairly early in their life, shipping the fish packed in ice to London. The Warren House at Kimbolton was thought to be an 18th century folly, as it could be seen on the crest of the hill from the castle. Research revealed that it had a much more interesting history, as the façade was planted onto a 2 roomed timber house, provided for the warrener. When found by the Trust, it was derelict, without its roof. As it seems to have always been an estate worker's cottage, the restoration has included the provision of appropriate simple furniture. A rather different project undertaken by the Trust was at Astley Castle in Warwickshire. The moated site included the hulk of a fortified manor, damaged by fire, weather and vandals. The Trust invited 12 architects to submit plans for the site, and the result has been to place a modern building within the ancient walls - retaining the exterior aspects of it. The project was rewarded with the RIBA Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2013.

Current work includes Belmont, at Lyme Regis in Dorset. This Grade II* villa had been the home of Eleanor Coade, a remarkable 18th century business woman. She had developed a formula for an artificial stone, which she convinced people was better than natural stone, as it was frost resistant. The house had later been compromised by 19th century additions, and so the Trust is going to return it to its 18th century form. The total cost will be £1.8 million, as the structure needs substantial work - but the Coade stone decorations just needed simple steam cleaning. A future project is Llwyn Celyn, in the Brecon Beacons National Park. This is a late 15th century hall house, and although it looks a humble dwelling, is considered by Cadw (the Welsh equivalent of English Heritage) to be 'the most important at risk inhabited house in Wales'.

Much more about the Trust and its work can be found at www.landmarktrust.org.uk - including how to arrange to stay in one of their Landmarks.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 10th, when the senior archivist at the Berkshire Record Office, Mark Stevens, will tell us about the history of Broadmoor Hospital. The Society will have its annual visit to a place of historic interest on Wednesday, June 25th - this year to Bentley Priory - an 18th century house that was the Headquarters of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain in 1940.