The Landmark Trust

THE TOWER, CANON'S ASHBY History Album

Written and researched by Clare Sherriff

2011

Re-presented in 2015

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 *and Scotland* SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 *Office* 01628 825920 *Facsimile* 01628 825417
Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

BASIC DETAILS

HOUSE:

1551 (or c. 1570) and 1708-10

TOWER:

c. 1560s

Home of the Dryden Family

Transferred to the National Trust Estate 1981

The Tower leased to the Landmark Trust 1983

Architects for the restoration: John Osborne Partnership (now Rodney Melville & Associates)

Builders: Linford Building

Work on the Tower flat completed 1982-3

Contents

Summary

The tower at Canons Ashby has stood for five centuries. From its Elizabethan origins (c. 1560) to 1981 the tower was in the custody of generations of the Dryden family, many of whom were content to preserve its way of life without disturbing its origins, and others who repaired its structure or remodelled certain aspects. Charles Latham, writing for *Country Life* in the 1900s described Canons Ashby as 'unmodernised and unsmartened… breath[ing] the spirit of antiquity.'[1] Thirty years later the Northamptonshire architect and historian John Gotch noted how time seemed to stand still at Canons Ashby; on entering its portals one was immediately transported back two hundred years. The nature of this time-capsule was to prove Canons Ashby's greatest asset and ironically too its greatest burden. By 1937 the current generation of Drydens were living in Zimbabwe; the house was rented out and rapidly descending into an irreparable state of decay. For many years the National Trust, and others, had been acutely aware of its dilemma. When the family advertised for a new tenant Gervase Jackson-Stops, the Architectural Advisor to the National Trust, knew the time had come to make a bid to save this unique piece of Elizabethan history, poetically described by Gotch as 'less than a palace…and more than a manor-house.'[2]

Occasionally in life a synergy of forces comes together fortuitous to a certain situation. So it was at Canons Ashby; spearheaded by the National Trust the Dryden family generously donated the house, lands and church to the Trust in 1980. The Trust was of course delighted, but similarly aware that without the necessary funds for repairs and endowment they would be unable to accept the gift. The newly established National Heritage Memorial Fund was persuaded to give half its allocation for the entire year (£1.5 million) to this relatively unknown property, as the basis of a restoration package. The building rapidly became a cause célèbre amongst country houses. Other donors stepped in: the Landmark Trust, the Department of the Environment and the Historic Buildings Trust. For Landmark this was a new partnership, a joint venture drawn up in 1983 with the National Trust, which resulted in Landmark being granted a lease for the tower to use and maintain as a holiday let. John Cornforth writing in *Country Life* (1981) magnanimously suggested that the £100,000 offered to the National Trust by the Manifold Trust was 'an act of great generosity as well as a psychological value, because it meant that the Trust would not be approaching other bodies and individuals with a completely empty bowl.' [3]

The task however was immense. The estate was a wilderness of dead trees; the house was riddled with death-watch beetle, unsound roofs, bowing walls and a deeply unstable tower. The southern elevation, divided by the tower, was a particularly serious problem. Rodney Melville of the John Osborne Partnership of Leamington Spa was the appointed architect to the project, with the Linford Building Group, specialists in historic restoration, carrying out the delicate

[1] Latham, C. (1904-9) *Country Life - In English Homes*, 2, p. 284.
[2] Gotch, J.A. (1936) p. 84.
[3] Cornforth, J. *Country Life* (1981) 169 p. 1026.

renovation work. Scaffolding had to be erected with incredible care; so fragile was the south wall that the slightest pressure could have brought it down. Later when a chute for the ancient garderobe (a medieval latrine) in the tower was discovered, the intended system of lightweight concrete beams, designed to hold up the tower, had to be radically revised to protect the chute. At peak times a team of over thirty Linford craftsmen worked on the restoration, some completing their apprenticeships within the building period. Canons Ashby opened to the public in April 1984 and was hailed as a restoration triumph setting an important precedent for generations of country houses to come. It was described at the time as 'arguably the most encouraging individual preservation package to have been worked out for a number of years.' [4]

As an object of architectural history the tower holds the secrets of Elizabethan construction techniques and design influences; the first two floors of the tower are timber-framed and predate the upper floors, which are constructed of local stone and brick. The nature of window design during the period can also be seen in the tower. The arched Tudor window lights, with hood mouldings, which were common at the time of Henry VIII (1509-47) and earlier, are the predominant window style. The tower also has examples of mullion windows with flat headers, without such arches, which became more popular as the century progressed. Both were commonly used throughout the period. The architectural historian Mark Girouard suggests it is a mistake to suggest the arched lights are earlier and the square heads later, as many examples of both exist throughout the century. The one definitive change in style is the classical door-case to the tower, part of the programme of 'modernisation' (1708-10) of Edward Dryden (d.1717), which shows the definite shift in taste to the classicism of the early eighteenth century. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories and the detailed drawings of the nineteenth-century antiquary Sir Henry Dryden (1818-99) considerably enhance the tower's history. Henry Dryden's highly accomplished architectural drawings are held by the Northamptonshire Record Office, and were used extensively in the restoration of the house. Until the nineteenth century it appears the tower at Canons Ashby was used for sleeping accommodation – a piece of eighteenth-century children's drawing is still preserved on its walls. Both local and national architectural history are therefore embedded within its walls.

The tower also can be read as history of the Dryden family itself. Its early origins connect to the history of the sixteenth-century Dryden family, who inherited a farmhouse on the site, which was subsequently remodelled. It is highly unusual for a Northamptonshire house of this period to have a tower placed within an elevation; more normally in Elizabethan architecture a tower would be incorporated into an entrance gate or corner addition. Gotch recounts how in the sixteenth century John Dryden (d. 1584) came from Cumberland to marry a daughter of Sir John Cope, who shortly after the dissolution of the monasteries, in 1536, became possessed of the lands at Canons Ashby formerly belonging to the Black Canons of the order of St Augustine. John Dryden inherited through his

[4] Cornforth, J. *Country Life* (1981) 169, p. 1026.

wife an L shaped farmhouse (the present entrance range) which he gradually extended in a clockwise direction adding the staircase tower and south-west block. Architectural historians have suggested that it is this Cumbrian connection of the Dryden's which is responsible for the nature of the tower. Its design is remarkably similar to the 'pele' towers, built on the Cumbrian and Scottish borders to repel invaders. Such towers were originally freestanding and were often later enlarged to incorporate wings and extensions.

The Elizabethan period was an important time architecturally for Northamptonshire. Mansions and manor houses of an astounding variety were built during this period, from the grand and opulent Kirby Hall (c. 1556) commissioned by Sir William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, Sir Thomas Tresham's Triangular Ruston Lodge (1593-7) illustrating the Elizabethan passion for symbolism, to the Elizabethan vernacular of Canons Ashby, with its rich tapestry of style and additions. The exterior of the tower at Canons Ashby shows no traces of the newly fashionable Renaissance classicism; instead it follows the Tudor Gothic typical of the majority of English buildings during the sixteenth century.

Using the pattern books of the Italian architect and theorist Sebastian Serlio (1475-1554), and the 'paynter and archytecte' John Shute's treatise on architecture, the first to be published in English, Elizabethan builders learnt the new way to dress a building using the classical orders. Symbolism was an important ingredient of Elizabethan architecture, which used images to convey messages of status, value and history. The Elizabethans viewed their world in a way which was measured by their concept of creation and knowledge of the universe. It was a unique order formulated with the influence of Plato and the Bible, and one which affected every aspect of their lives including their architecture.

A tower believed to be built just before Elizabeth came to the throne, influenced by a family unconnected to Northamptonshire, but destined to become pivotal to the evolution of this important Elizabethan courtyard house, is a particularly special piece of architectural history. Its fortune has waxed and waned during the centuries; by the 1880s a tree was recorded as growing out of its structure. In the twenty-first century visitors to the tower have the rather special experience of staying in a Landmark property, which is part of a National Trust house, and seeing for themselves the architectural, dynastic and social history of this unique building, described by Lawrence Rich, the National Trust's Appeals Secretary as 'one of the most romantic places in a county renowned for splendid houses.'[5]

[5] Rich, L. (1981) *The National Trust Magazine*, 13-46, 'Anatomy of a Rescue Operation,' p. 11.

Canons Ashby

'Less than a palace….and more than a manor-house'

Canons Ashby, *Country Life* 1921

The Tower at Canons Ashby and its Early History

The Elizabethan manor house of Canons Ashby has the unusual distinction of a square tower placed within its southern front. The tower, artistically integrated, just left of centre into the H plan Elizabethan courtyard house dominates this façade. It is a bold eye-catcher, 50' [15.24m] in height, acting as a focal point and fulcrum for the development of the house. Despite being only one element of the present building, the tower can be read as a metaphor for many aspects of the history of Canons Ashby. It connects to the history of the sixteenth-century Dryden family, who inherited an earlier farmhouse on the site which was subsequently remodelled, it speaks of the individual approach of 'artificer' or artisan-led building techniques during this period – the profession of architect was yet to evolve – and of the architectural development of an important Northamptonshire home. As a stand-alone feature, with its eighteenth-century classical door-case, it is most definitely an object of architectural curiosity.

The tower also represents the Landmark Trust's first joint venture with the National Trust, the two working together to secure its future. In 1981 Canons Ashby was a deeply dilapidated building, but generally acknowledged as architecturally significant. The National Trust became the principal benefactor to the property, assigning a lease for the tower to the Landmark Trust in 1983.

The German architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner, writing in the 1960s, famously describes Northamptonshire as a 'county of squires and spires.'[6] Canons Ashby dutifully complies. The spire of St Mary's church, close to the house, soars above the landscape. Fragments of the church belonging to the Augustinian priory c. 1150 are extant. The name of Canons Ashby refers to the Black Canons of this priory; Ashby was often understood as meaning a village where ash trees grow. Other sources say that the adage Ashby was devised to distinguish it from other places of the same name in the county. To the east

[6] Pevsner, N. Cherry, B. (1961, 1973) *Buildings of England Northamptonshire,* p. 17. Pevsner acknowledges he was not the first to suggest this.

Northamptonshire is rich in stone. Ironstone or Marlstone is quarried near Banbury in Oxfordshire, and is clearly visible in the construction of the tower and house. The use of bricks gained popularity as a building material in the Elizabethan era; by the sixteenth century permanent brickworks had already been established in some areas. Red brick is clearly visible on the upper levels of the tower. There were no regulations concerning the size, quality or price of brick at this time; production was not standardized until the nineteenth century.

Pevsner also described Northamptonshire as a county of small towns, with memorable villages and country houses of every size. The urban conglomeration of Northampton and other towns have changed considerably in the past fifty years, but interestingly his statement still seems to stand. The architectural nature of Northamptonshire however had changed dramatically in the mid sixteenth-century. Mansions and manor houses of an astounding variety were built during this period, from the grand and opulent Kirby Hall (c. 1556) commissioned by Sir William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, Sir Thomas Tresham's Lyveden New Bield (1594) a garden lodge built in the shape of a Greek Cross symbolising Tresham's Catholic faith, to the Elizabethan vernacular of Canons Ashby, with its rich tapestry of style and additions. Elizabeth 1 (1558-1603) was not a builder, but her courtiers and potential noblemen, keen to impress and rapidly gaining riches from her court, manifested their new found wealth in mansions and houses, the later ones often using in the newly imported 'antik stile' of the Renaissance. The prospect of a royal progress, and the visit it entailed, was incentive enough for her wealthier subjects to build on a grandiose scale.

The Northamptonshire architect and historian John Alfred Gotch wrote extensively on Elizabethan architecture in the Victorian period documenting the principal houses of the county: Burghley, Apethorpe and Holdenby - the biggest house in England at the time - and many more including Canons Ashby. Of Canons Ashby he commented in 1936 'It is less than a palace, such as Burghley,

and more than a manor-house.' Gotch observed then that 'nothing of importance has been done to modernize it, and it preserves the appearance and the atmosphere of two hundred years ago.' [7] Some thirty years later the National Trust similarly recognised the state and rarity of Canons Ashby's condition.

Gotch tells how in the sixteenth century John Dryden came to Northamptonshire from Cumberland, and married a daughter of Sir John Cope in 1551. After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 Sir John acquired land formerly belonging to the Black Canons of the order of St Augustine. Many dynastic families were established during this period; those who adroitly bought up monastery lands established large estates and generally prospered from them. The remains of the priory were made into a residence by Sir John. Gervase Jackson-Stops, the Architectural Advisor to the National Trust, confirmed that John Dryden built the core of the present house, 'probably incorporating parts of an earlier farm on the site.' The National Trust handbook on Canons Ashby states that ' in 1551 John Dryden inherited, through his wife, an L shaped farmhouse (the present entrance range) which he gradually extended in a clockwise direction' adding ' the staircase tower and south-west block (now containing the Dining and Tapestry Rooms)' and later building the Hall and Kitchen . [8]

The earliest parts of the house, Gotch believed, including the tower, appeared to have been built by Sir John Cope. John Cornforth writing in *Country Life* (1981) believed that the lower part of the tower pre-dated John Dryden's time; John Dryden died in 1584. The tower has timber-framed construction on the first two stages, with brick and stone above. There is no documentary evidence to date the tower but the general consensus of opinion today is that the tower was built by John Dryden probably in the 1560s, originally with floors of living accommodation, accessed by the small spiral staircase on the top two floors. [9]

[7] Gotch J.A. (1936) *The Old Halls and Manor Houses of Northamptonshire*, p. 84.
[8] Jackson-Stops, G. *Building (*1984) 246, p. 44. Garrett, O. *Canons Ashby* (2001) p.2.
[9] Cornforth, J. *Country Life* (1981) 169, p. 930.

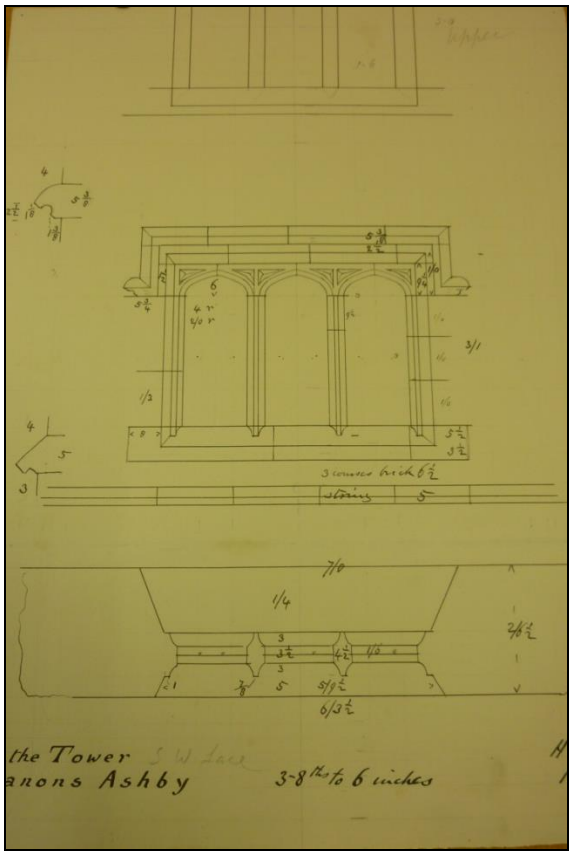
Gothic was the predominant style of the Middle Ages and it is this style, with its Tudor derivative, which is found in the tower. In the stone buildings of Gothic architecture we look for pointed arches, stone piers (a strong piece of masonry acting as a support) decorated with clusters of shafts, buttresses, windows with tracery , openings with mouldings, spires, pinnacles and battlements. In the Tudor period (late fifteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century) the arch generally becomes more flattened, and the windows square-headed, rather than pointed, although both styles can be found throughout the period. Elaborate diaper brickwork and fanciful chimneys are other notable Tudor trademarks.

Canons Ashby –
Courtyard Elevation of the Tower, NMR (undated)

This early photograph of the tower, taken from the courtyard, shows a variety of window styles, all with leaded lights. At the ground floor is a two light mullion window, with rounded arched lights and a hood moulding, the latter being the stone heading sitting directly above the window. The term mullion describes the

upright stone division between the separate lights of the window. On the second floor sits a square-headed mullion and transom (horizontal stone element) three-light window, again with the hood moulding, then a single stair light, with the two top floors showing single round arched lights. Interestingly the Northamptonshire archives hold drawings relating to the tower.

Sir Henry Dryden, a descendant of poet John Dryden, was a renowned antiquary in his day, succeeding his father at the age of nineteen. He made extensive measured drawings of the house; these constitute important archival material for the estate, and were an important source for the restoration of the building. One such drawing is of the Tudor arched windows (1888) of the tower, which shows the proportions and style of a typical Tudor Gothic window with detailed measurements. The southern elevation of the tower has similar three-light mullion windows to the first and second floor (see Sir Henry's drawing below) all with hood moulds, and a similar window to the fourth floor.



Sir Henry Dryden's Drawing of a Mullion Window in the Tower (1888), Northamptonshire Archives

The arched Tudor window lights which were common in the time of Henry VIII, and earlier, are the predominant window type at Canons Ashby. Mullioned windows with flat headers, without the arches, as in the second-floor courtyard elevation of the tower became increasingly popular as the century progressed.

By the mid-1560s change was in the air and for a generation Northamptonshire became the centre of architectural innovation. The Italian or Franco-Italian Renaissance style, showcased in houses such as Dingley (c. 1550s) and Kirby Hall (c. 1570) in the county set the marker for this new fashion. Such novelty however appears to have passed Canons Ashby by, that is until Edward Dryden 'modernised' his house with a programme of sashes and classical door-cases in the early eighteenth century. Gotch helps to explain these shifts by suggesting that two 'streams of design' emerged at this mid sixteenth-century period, that of 'learned architecture and that of the country mason,' Canons Ashby adheres to the latter, under the guidance of its owner John Dryden. [10]

[10] Gotch, J.A. (1936) p. ix.

Elizabethan Architecture

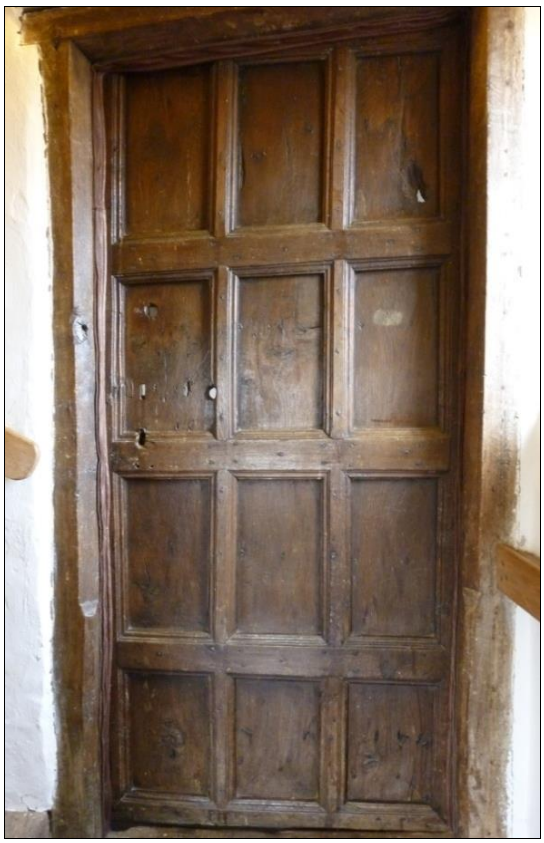
In order to appreciate the architecture of Canons Ashby it useful to understand the background of sixteenth-century building practice, and this massively important shift in design that occurred during Elizabeth's reign. (Mark Girouard's *Elizabethan Architecture* (2009) and Sir John Summerson's *Architecture in Britain* 1530-1610 (1953, 1991) are both excellent sources.)

Prior to and during the sixteenth century the building trade operated under the guidance of guilds, trade organizations, who were resident in incorporated towns – i.e. those appointed by a royal charter. Craftsmen, or 'artificers' as they were known served a long apprenticeship, and were subject to the rules and standards of their guild. In the country artificers worked generally under the control of a master mason; the quarries similarly took on apprentices in their own right, practising in a similar manner to the guilds. There was a clear distinction between carpenters and joiners. Carpenters 'were concerned with structure: they provided 'floors, ceilings, roof-structures, staircases' and timber-frames, whereas joiners were responsible for 'lining and decorating,' panelling known as 'seeling,' door-cases, chimneypieces, and 'carved woodwork of all kinds, as well as furniture.'[11]

The staircase and entrance door to the tower accommodation would have been constructed by carpenters and joiners respectively.

[11] Girouard, M. (2009) *Elizabethan Architecture,* p. 33.

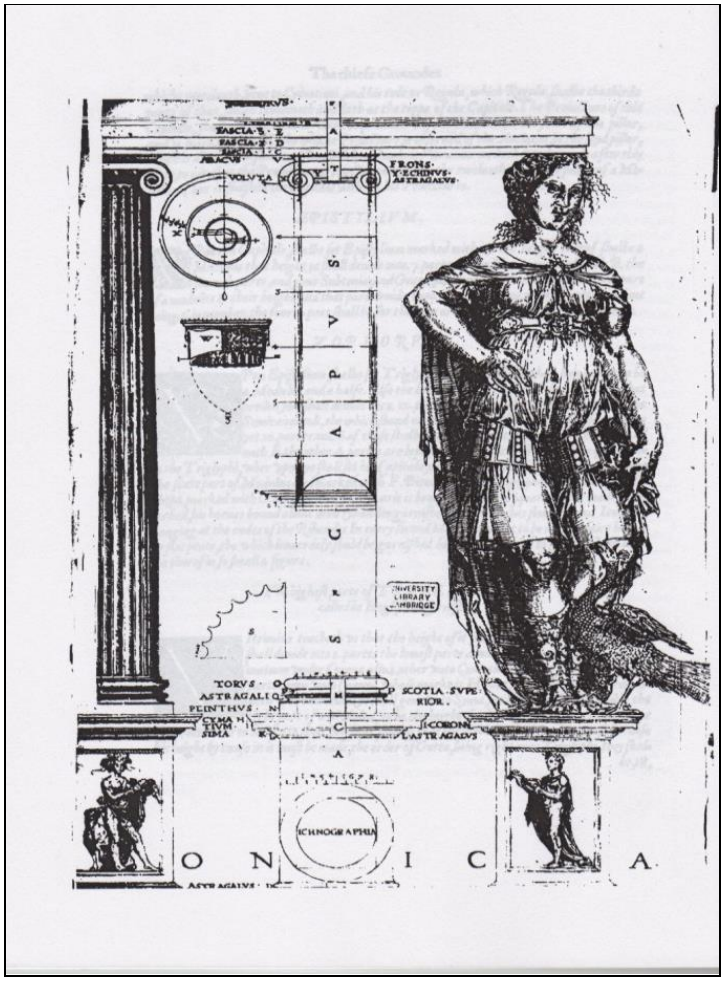
The Tower Staircase (1989) and Door to the Tower Flat (2011)



In all but the grandest house construction various gangs of artificers would be employed by a surveyor, who in turn could have been taken on by a master craftsman. At the head of this hierarchy of employment was the squire or owner of the house, who in his own right would be likely to have 'knowledge of geometry and the ability to draw and measure' this being part of his education as a gentleman. The procedure was a joint collaboration, the owner perhaps 'devising,' which in Elizabethan terms meant having an idea, and the master craftsman or surveyor or even the squire himself 'plotting' or drawing it out.

The impetus to follow the classical style of Italy and France principally came to England though texts, pattern-books and engravings, many coming from Antwerp, which by mid-century was the commercial centre of Europe. The Italian theorist, architect and painter Serlio's treatise *Architettura* (1537-75) became a primary source for any learned Elizabethan with pretentions to build. Serlio described and illustrated the five Roman orders of architecture, Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite, along with the classical monuments in Rome and elsewhere. In the classical world the various orders were associated with certain attributes; the Ionic and Corinthian were seen as feminine orders, and the Doric masculine. This appealed to the Elizabethan mind which was consumed with symbolism, order and degree. So keen were the aristocracy to learn this new fashion that The Duke of Northumberland sent his protégé John Shute to Italy, in the 1550s, to learn and absorb the classical manner. In 1563 Shute, by this time describing himself as 'paynter and archytecte, 'published his *First and Chief Groundes of Architecture* which became a principle text for the Elizabethan builder.[12]

[12] Shute, J. (1563) *The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture*. The Roman Vitruvius' (fl. 46-30 BC) *De Architectura* was also a known text.



John Shute's Drawing of the Ionic Column
The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture **(1563)**

Armed with Serlio and Shute the Elizabethan surveyor was able to copy the decorative elements of the classical world, and merge this with their own idiosyncratic symbols and dimensions of the Tudor Gothic, in what was very much a free style. As Mark Girouard writes 'Elizabethan classicism was home-made.'[13] We therefore find the heady mixture of gables, of vast mullion bay windows, common to English architecture of the period, broken as at Hardwick Hall (1590-7) in Derbyshire, by a loggia of eight Tuscan columns, or porticos rich with pilasters and classical decoration, pediments, and grandiose chimney-pieces decorated with columns and antique detail.

[13] Girouard, M. (2009) p. 175.

The influence of the Roman philosopher Plato was similarly assimilated into the Elizabethan world; his work was widely read by educated Elizabethans. Emanating from Plato was the concept of an idea behind a building, viewed as a separate concept, which was often 'more important than the material building itself.' [14] The allegorical nature of ideas emanating from a building held great appeal to the Elizabethan mind.

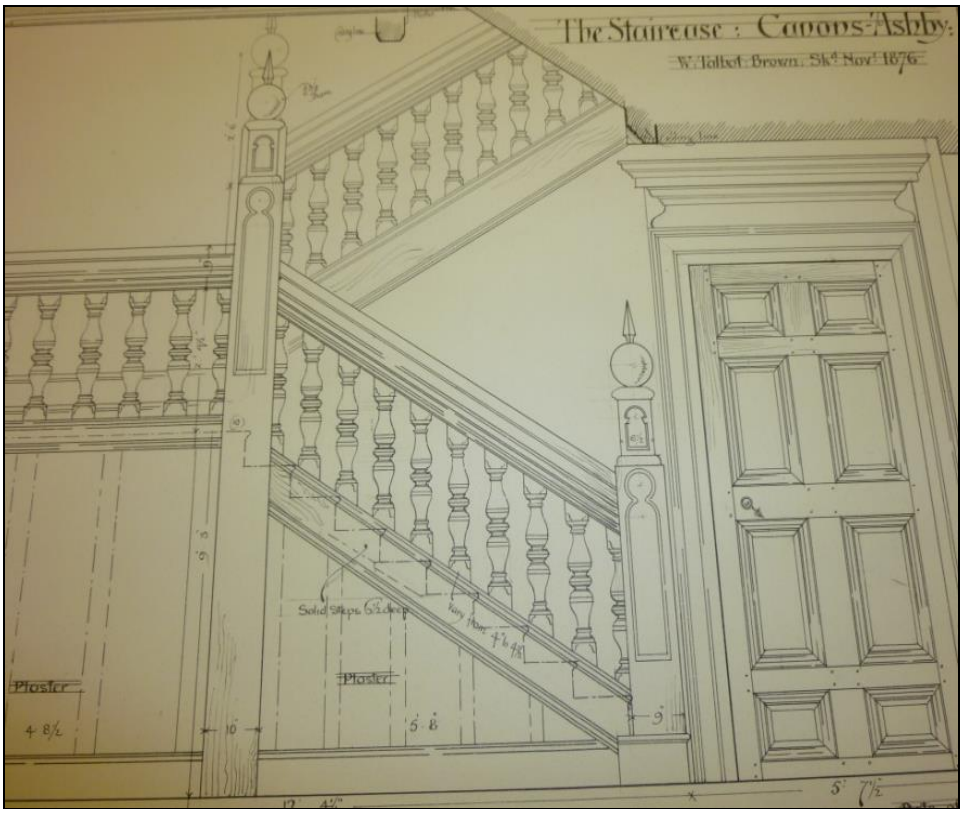
In terms of form Girouard writes that by the 'late sixteenth century the single-range house… was competing for favour with the courtyard house' and that' the changeover from inward looking to the outward looking house is one of the outstanding developments of the Elizabethan period.' The Elizabethans, he writes, designed their houses 'from the inside out,' function dictated form, the kitchen required ventilation and light, the hall adequate space, for this was where everyone ate including the servants, and where visitors were received on business, the great chamber demanded proportion, size and a central location, and the parlour comfort and privacy. Lodgings and gate-houses were easily distinguishable from the main building. Images and devices alluded to allegory, on skylines, on pediments, and on chimneys, fashioned in wood and in stone, their purpose being to inform, suggest and impress. The gable, the great glass bay window, stone mullions within the window frame – stone rather than wood windows being a symbol of wealth - and decorated entrances generally combined to create a sense of symmetry, without succumbing to any rule book. Although the architectural defences of towers, turrets and battlements were by this time more ornamental than defensive, the Elizabethan house often guarded its privacy by surrounding itself with high walls, internalising its services, stables, dairy, brew-house and laundry, within its wings or courtyards.[15]

Doors and windows in the Elizabethan building depict their function. Aesthetics added towers and balustrades, heavily decorated rooftops and skylines. The Elizabethan house held numerous status symbols, its great chamber was the

[14] Girouard, M. (2009) p. 58.
[15] Girouard, M. (2009) pp. 84, x,

principal receiving room of the house, distinguished by a monumental chimney piece, the hall screen was another notable attribute, often elaborately carved, and by the seventeenth century the central staircase became an equally important addition. These primary signifiers were often skilfully decorated with elaborate symbols or images, which informed the visitor of the qualities and noble deeds of their owners.

The great oak staircase at Canon's Ashby was built in the early seventeenth century by Sir Erasmus Dryden (1553-1632) or his son Sir John, in order to provide a grander route from the Hall to the first-floor Chamber. It suitably stuns the visitor with its monumental 'grenade' and sphere finials on robust oak newel posts, turned balusters and expansive treads, guiding them up to the first-floor Chamber, and then on up to the tower accommodation. Internally it dominates and subjugates the southern entrance of the building.



Drawing of the Staircase at Canons Ashby (1876)
Northamptonshire Archives

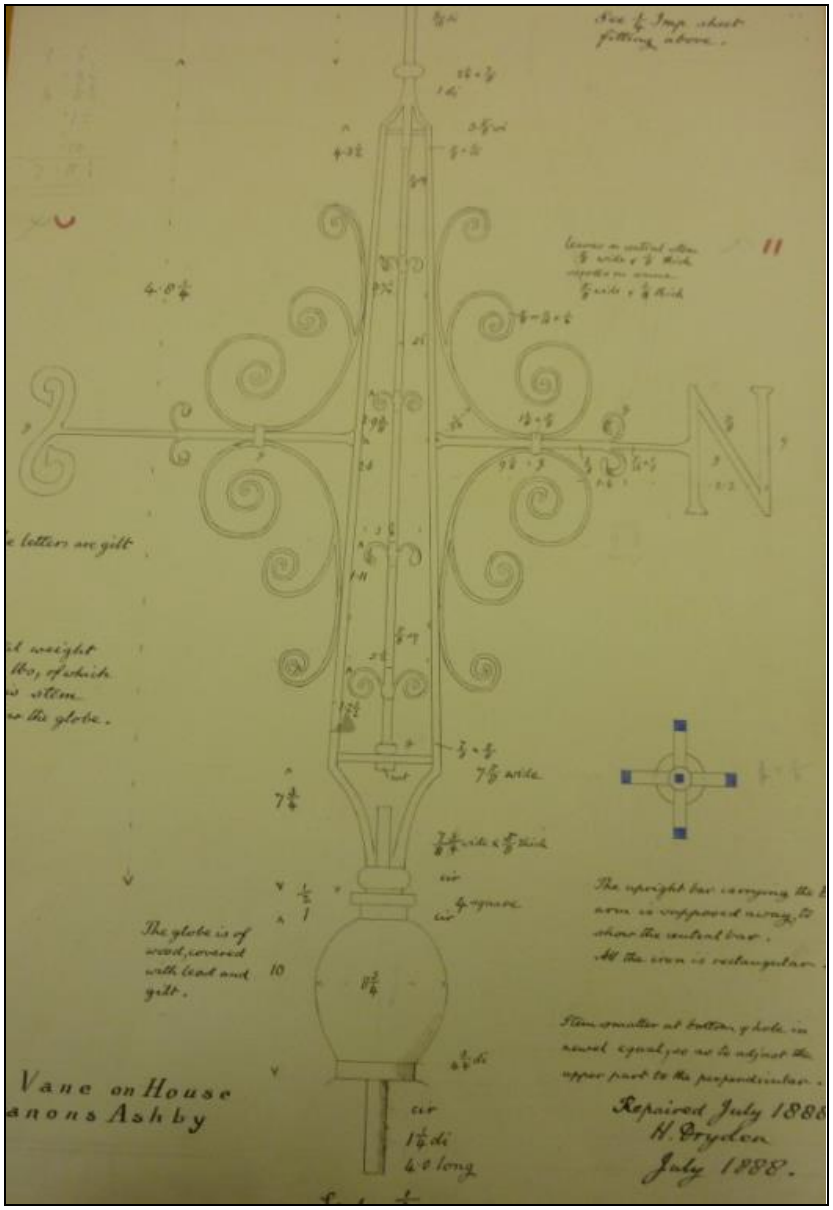
The Staircase Canons Ashby (2011)

Girouard writes that Elizabethans witnessed a 'heyday for leadwork and for inventive plumbers and glaziers… [where] elaborate rainwater heads… [began] to replace the traditional spouts to take water off roofs.' The visitor to the tower will note the garderobe in the corner of the sitting room – an early closet – lead-lined ducts, washed through with rainwater from the gutters, took the drainage from the closet down to a soak-away at ground-floor level. The garderobe chute, made of stone, can be seen by looking through a small door on the stairs, constructed for that purpose.[16]

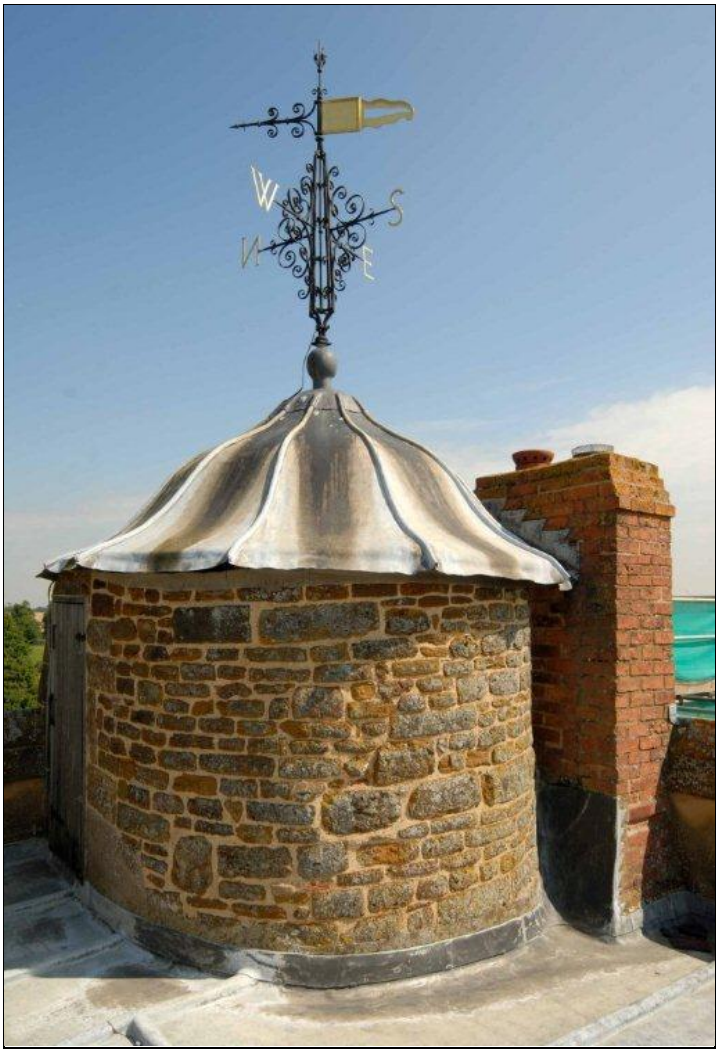
Early craftsmanship is also seen in the newly restored weathervane on top of the tower. A drawing of the weathervane, by Henry Dryden, shows the delicacy of the wrought iron-work. The weathervane was restored in 1888, the same year as the drawing.

[16] Girouard, M. (2009) p. 91

The delight of taking a view and of walking up and down on the 'leads' was, Girouard writes, a Elizabethan passion; it is common to find the more elaborate rooftops decorated with finials and other architectural conceits creating an aerial fantasy. Landmarkers can find the key to the rooftop door at the top of the tower on the turret staircase, and despite the somewhat restricted space of the ogee roof they can experience for themselves the stunning views across the Northamptonshire countryside, in a similar manner to the Tudor inhabitants.



Sir Henry Dryden's drawing of the Weathervane at Canons Ashby (1888)



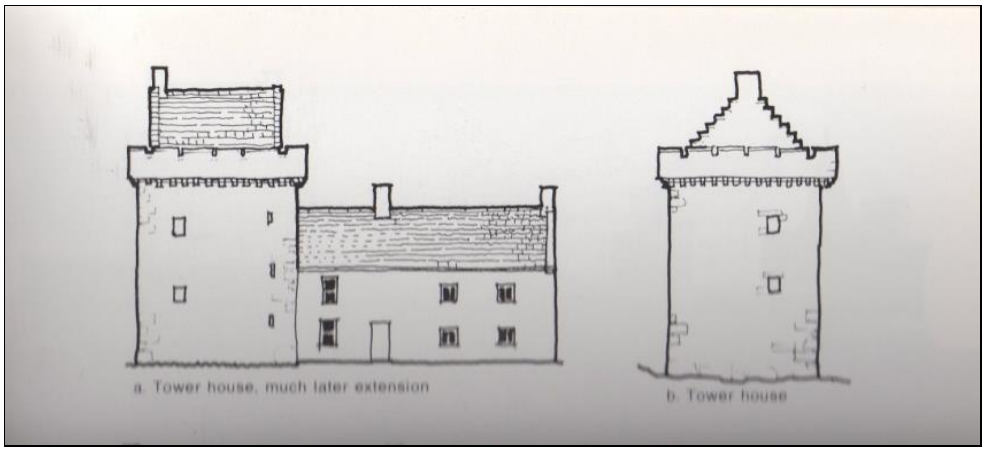
The Ogee Tower and Weathervane Canons Ashby (2007)

Summerson noted that builders in this period were primarily concerned with reinforcing the traditions of the past, building their houses round a court, which was either entered 'through a conspicuous porch or a gate-tower.' The early history of the tower at Canons Ashby is to some extent a mystery; a tower incorporated into an elevation of a house, which is not a gate or corner tower, is as previously mentioned unusual in Northamptonshire architecture of the period.[17]

[17] Summerson, J. (1953, 1991) p.37.

Pele Towers and the Cumbrian Connection

It has been suggested that the Cumbrian connections of the Dryden family is the key to the history of the tower. Gervase Jackson-Stops' 1994 lecture to the Northamptonshire Record Society suggested that as John Dryden's father came from Cumberland, so it is perfectly possible that the tower was inspired by the defensive pele towers of the border country. The vernacular architectural historian Richard Brunskill describes how in the southern uplands of Scotland the tower house was a common building type, a house literally within a tower, which was one of the earliest forms of defensive habitation. As buildings evolved and defence became less important one- or two-storey wings were often added to the towers, as an adjunct, creating more living space as the drawing below shows. Alternatively a stone tower sometimes was added to a timber hall. In *Traditional Buildings of Cumbria* Brunskill describes how early examples of large houses c. 1350-1600, 'especially those in the northern and eastern part of Cumbria, include provision for refuge or defence.' These buildings fall into two groups: 'the fortified and the non-fortified'; the tower house, with or without extensions being classified as a fortified building.[18]



The Evolution of the Tower House
Brunskill, R. (1981, 1992) *Traditional Buildings of England*

[18] Brunskill, R (2002) *Traditional Buildings of Cumbria* p. 36

Typically a Cumbrian tower house would be three storeys in height, on a simple rectangular plan, with thick stone walls of 4' (1.219m) or more, often with a barrel vault on the ground-floor. A stone spiral staircase on the first-floor would lead to the living accommodation, with a rooftop battlemented parapet. Access to the first-floor would have been by ladder. Later examples had wooden floors, but a 'fireproof ground-floor would be essential for effective defence or safe refuge.' Typically the living room or hall was on the first floor with a wall fireplace, with the floor above being a chamber or private room, similar to the layout at Canons Ashby. The walkway on top of the tower was sometimes a lead flat, which is again similar to Canons Ashby. As the Cumbrian buildings were generally larger than the tower at Canons Ashby the garderobe was often placed at the end of a corridor on a corner of the building.

Brunskill describes how the tower houses of Cumbria were built to act as chains along the border, one on each side, constructed as and when required. The term 'pele' towers, from the Latin palus meaning a stake, has 'come to mean a tower, whether free-standing or part of a larger house.' It is believed that there were over two hundred 'towers and castles in Cumbria, but only a dozen or them are still self-contained tower houses' such as Dacre Castle, south of Penrith in Cumbria, which is still inhabited and Kirkandrews on Esk, just inside the Scottish border. Most were incorporated into later structures. The Scots became the more prolific builders of the independent tower house.[19]

Although somewhat of a digression to this history, the evolution of these northern pele towers does appear to relate to the structure at Canons Ashby, because of the Cumbrian connection of the Dryden family, and the lack of similar tower structures in Northamptonshire. Certainly Brunskill's description of the internal layout of first floor living room and upper floor chamber of a typical pele tower is similar to that of Canons Ashby.

[19] Brunskill, R. (2002) pp. 36-40.

Inside the Tower

Access to the tower at Canons Ashby, through the classical door-case on the southern front, 'modernised' by Edward Dryden in the early eighteenth century is a grand affair. The door is decorated with a console keyblock (a classical bracket resembling a keystone) and a broken segmental pediment, visible above the door on the photograph below. A pediment is a low pitch triangular gable found over porticos or facades in classical architecture. The broken or segmental pediment was first found in Antique Roman architecture around the 1st century AD and was connected at that time to the goddess Isis and the crescent moon.

The South Front Showing the Classical Door-case of the Tower (2009)

The transition from the great oak staircase to the spiral stairs of the tower prepares the visitor for the more homely proportions of the tower accommodation. This includes a spacious living room (originally one of the two tower bedrooms) with a stone fireplace, showing the depressed Tudor arch, and leaded lights overlooking the garden and countryside beyond. It is believed that the window-shutters date from 1700, when alterations were made to the wing as a whole.

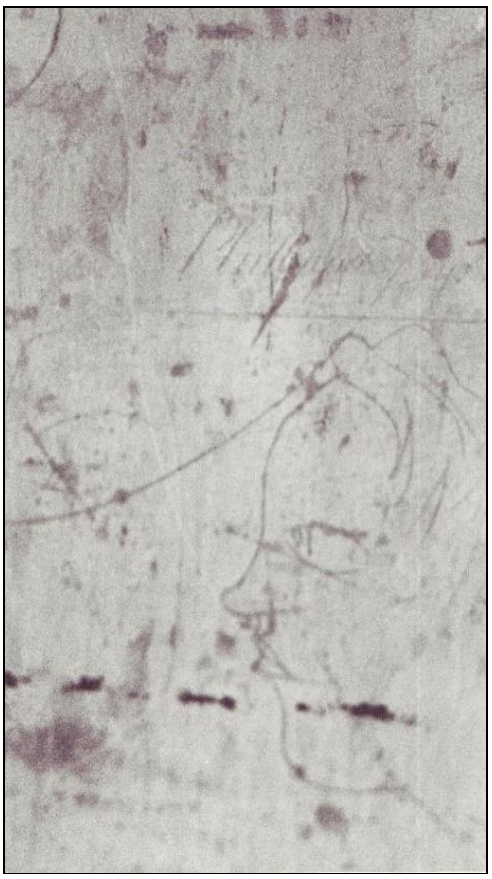
As part of the restoration process of the tower new partitions were put up in the western attics to make the kitchen, with the bathroom beyond. A new dormer window was put into the kitchen. Charlotte Haslam then Historian of the Landmark Trust described how the eighteenth- century partitions between the kitchen and bathroom lobby, and the floors of the same date were retained for future reference. [20]

On the floor above there is a spacious bedroom with a simple cast-iron gate on the staircase wall. Landmarkers will also notice some eighteenth-century children's graffiti on this wall, protected by perspex, and signed by Phillipa Dryden believed to be a sister of Elizabeth Dryden (1753-1824). The most prominent has a large nose, which presumably caused the Dryden children a great deal of fun at the time.

The Tudor Arch Stone Fireplace 2011

[20] Haslam, C. (1985) Restoration Notes. p.4

View from the Tower Window 1989

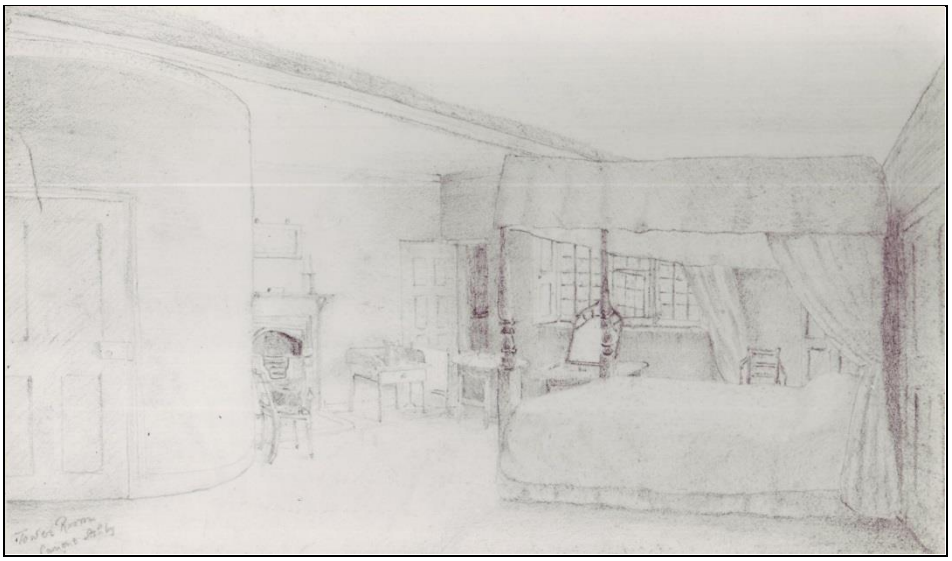


**Phillipa Dryden's Graffiti on the Upper Floor Bedroom,
c. Eighteenth Century**

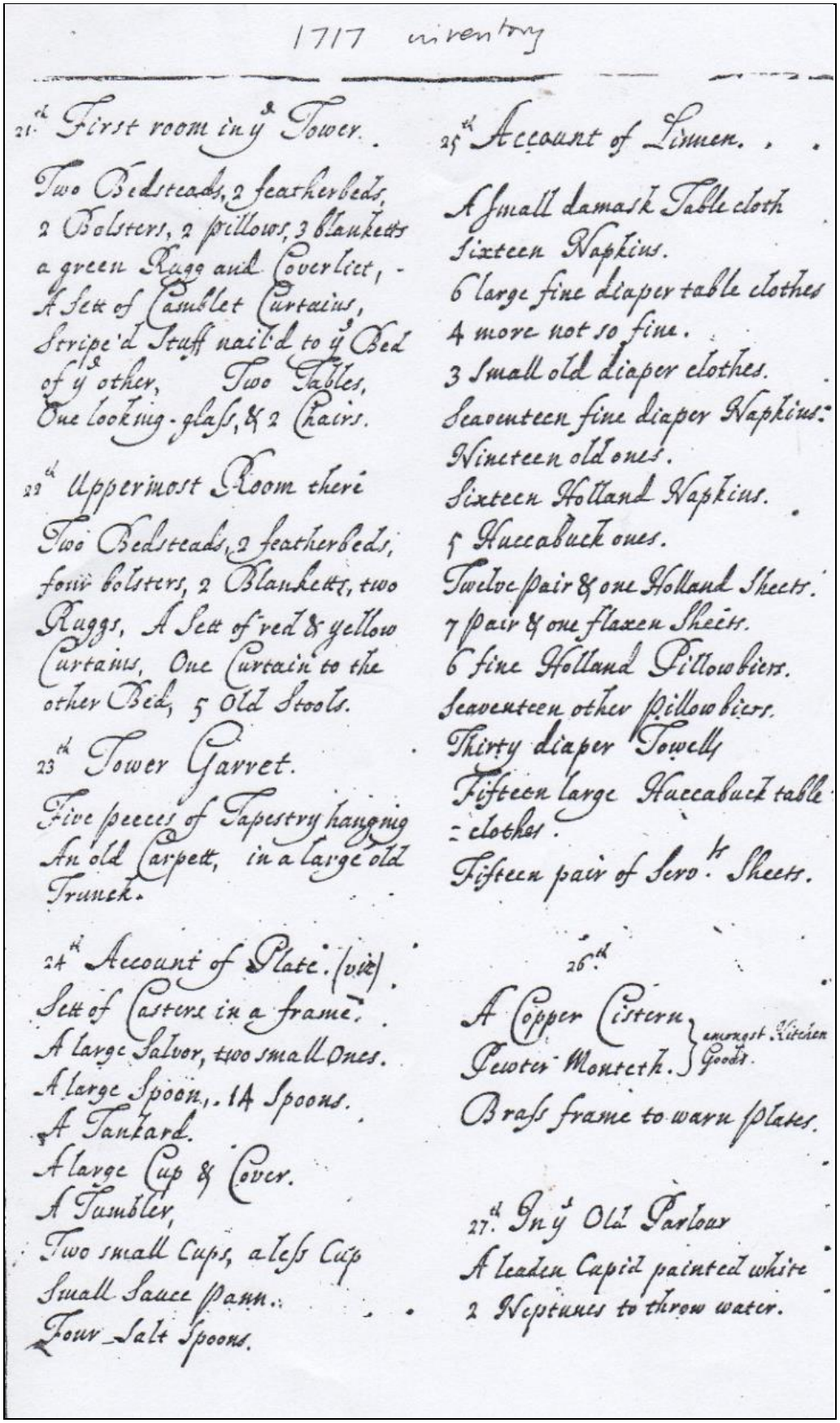
Three inventories exist for the tower, dated 1717, 1756 and 1819 respectively. The 1717 inventory lists the 'First room in y Tower' which contained two bedsteads, two feather bed and bolsters, bedding, curtains, 'Stripe'd Stuff nail'd to y Bed' two tables and chairs and a looking- glass. In the 'Uppermost Room' there were also two beds and an assortment of bed linen.

The 1756 Inventory makes similar reading describing the contents of the upper and lower tower rooms. In the upper tower room were 'two Beds with White Curtains flower'd with Black' two feather-beds, blankets, a red rug and a 'Turkey work'd chair.' In the room below the inventory lists a brown half wadded… bed, a 'flower'd Quilt, ' a feather bed and bolster, 'three Turkey work chairs…a Cover'd Elbow Chair…a swing looking gla[s]s' two Delft chamber pots, a brass fire shovel and other essentials for living.

By 1819 only the contents of the lower tower room are listed; these included a 'four Post Bedstead with yellow furniture,' feather bed, bolster and 'an Arm Chair with orange colour seat.' These inventories show that the tower was used as bedroom accommodation for the house during these periods. A nineteenth-century pencil drawing of the first-floor tower room, with the Tudor stone fireplace brings these inventories to life; it shows the four-poster bed with hangings, a washstand, looking-glass and other furniture.



The Tower Bedroom c. 1880



1717 inventory

21st First room in ye Tower.

Two Bedsteads, 2 featherbeds, 2 Bolsters, 2 pillows, 3 blanketts a green Rugg and Coverlitt, - A Sett of Camblet Curtains, Stripe'd Stuff nail'd to ye Bed of ye other, Two Tables, One looking-glass, & 2 Chairs.

22d Uppermost Room there

Two Bedsteads, 2 featherbeds, four bolsters, 2 Blanketts, two Ruggs, A Sett of red & yellow Curtains, One Curtain to the other Bed, 5 Old Stools.

23d Tower Garret.

Five peeces of Tapestry hanging An old Carpett, in a large old Trunck.

24th Account of Plate. (viz)

Sett of Casters in a frame.
A large Salver, two small Ones.
A large Spoon, 14 Spoons.
A Tankard.
A large Cup & Cover.
A Tumbler,
Two small Cups, a less Cup
Small Sauce Pann.
Four Salt Spoons.

25th Account of Linnen.

A small damask Table cloth
Sixteen Napkins.
6 large fine diaper table clothes
4 more not so fine.
3 small old diaper clothes.
Seaventeen fine diaper Napkins.
Nineteen old ones.
Sixteen Holland Napkins.
5 Huccabuck ones.
Twelve pair & one Holland Sheets.
7 pair & one flaxen Sheets.
6 fine Holland Pillowbiers.
Seaventeen other pillowbiers.
Thirty diaper Towells
Fifteen large Huccabuck table-clothes.
Fifteen pair of Sero. Sheets.

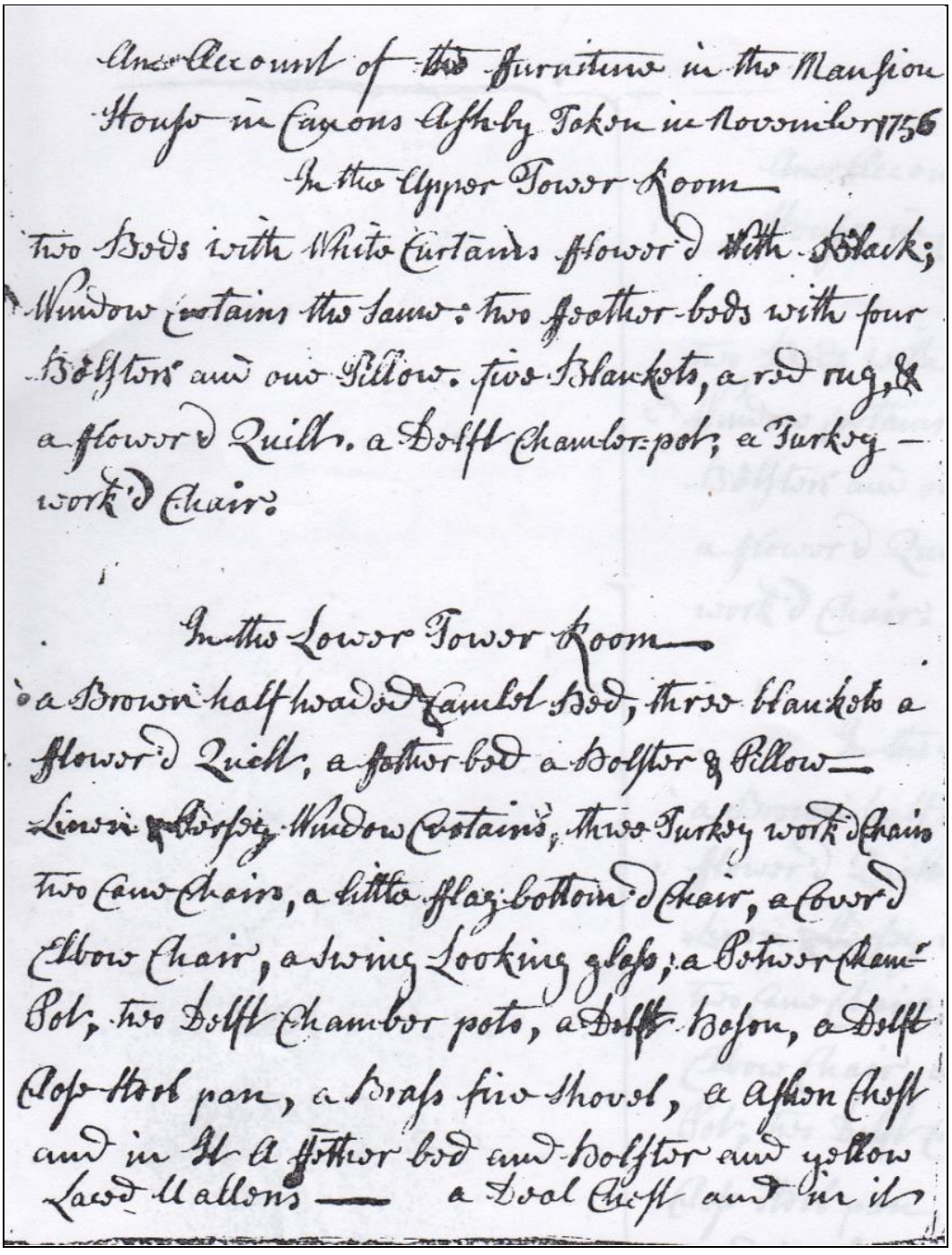
26th

A Copper Cistern } amongst Kitchen
Pewter Monteth. } Goods.
Brass frame to warm plates.

27th In ye Old Parlour

A leaden Cupid painted white
2 Neptunes to throw water.

1717 Inventory for the Upper and Lower Tower Rooms



An Account of the Furniture in the Mansion House in Canons Ashby Taken in November 1756

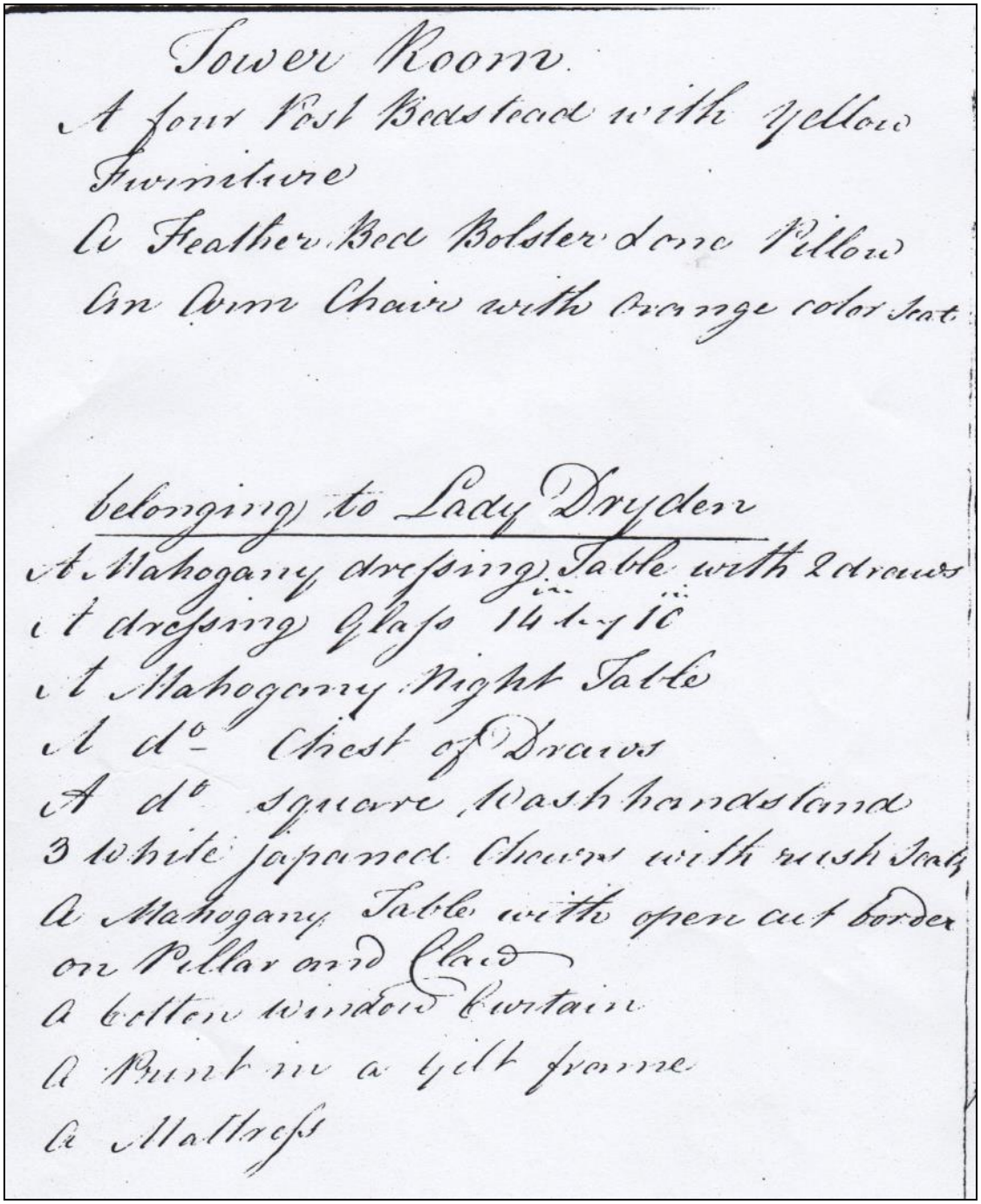
In the Upper Tower Room

two Beds with White Curtains flowerd with Black; Window Curtains the same: two feather beds with four Bolsters and one Pillow. five Blankets, a red rug, & a flowerd Quilt. a Delft Chamber-pot; a Turkey-work'd Chair.

In the Lower Tower Room

a Brown half waded Camlet Bed, three blankets a flowerd Quilt, a feather bed a Bolster & Pillow — Linen & Worsted Window Curtains, three Turkey work Chairs two Cane Chairs, a little flag-bottomed Chair, a Covered Elbow Chair, a swing Looking glass; a Pewter Chamber Pot, two Delft Chamber pots, a Delft Bason, a Delft Pap-boat pan, a Brass fire Shovel, a Ashen Chest and in it a feather bed and Bolster and yellow Lined Mallons — a Deal Chest and in it

1756 Inventory for the Upper and Lower Tower Rooms



Tower Room.
A four Post Bedstead with Yellow
Furniture
A Feather Bed Bolster & one Pillow
An Arm Chair with Orange color Seat

belonging to Lady Dryden
1 Mahogany dressing Table with 2 drawers
1 dressing Glass 14 by 16
1 Mahogany Night Table
1 do Chest of Drawers
A do square Washhandstand
3 White japanned Chairs with rush Seats
A Mahogany Table with open cut border
on Pillar and Claw
A cotton window Curtain
A Print in a Gilt frame
A Mattress

1819 Inventory for the Tower Room

Restoring Canons Ashby

Bearing in mind the local nature of construction in sixteenth-century Northamptonshire Canons Ashby remains a remarkably preserved time-warp of its Tudor inhabitants and their lives. Relatively little damage to the fabric of the building over the centuries is apparent in this early photograph.

Canons Ashby Exterior c. 1904

However, the task facing the National Trust in the 1980s was Herculean. The following account of the restoration process shows the extent of devastation to which the building had succumbed.

'On a winter's day when the wind howls around Canons Ashby it is hard to believe that the windows will hold and that a heavy fall of snow will not bring down the bowing walls of the Great Chamber,' wrote John Cornforth in 1981. Gervase Jackson-Stop's lecture to the Northamptonshire Record Society (1994) told how the great tower had a tree growing out of it in the 1880s. Before its

restoration Canons Ashby was understandably described as a cold forbidding place.[21]

As the centuries progressed very little had been done to save the fabric of the building. After 1937 the Dryden family ceased to use Canons Ashby as a home, spending most of their time in Zimbabwe. The National Trust and the Historical Buildings Council were both deeply concerned for its future. In the summer of 1980 the three Dryden brothers advertised for a new tenant. This was to prove the catalyst for the National Trust to instigate a restoration plan. Essentially this was made possible by the Dryden family offering the house, church and land to the Trust as a gift. The National Trust would not have been able to accept the Dryden gift without the guarantee of a fund for repair and endowment. The newly established National Heritage Memorial Fund was also to play a vital role in the restoration package.

In 1981 the magazine *Building Design* described how 'one little-known country house in Northamptonshire is to benefit from half [£1.5 million] of the entire National Heritage Memorial Fund allocation for next year.' £500,000 was given for 'immediate works, with the rest used to guarantee the future of the house.' Other donors included the Department of Environment, the Historic Buildings Council and the Manifold Trust. The article cited the architectural value and historical importance of the house. Canons Ashby became a *cause célèbre* amongst country houses as the first country house to benefit from the National Heritage Fund. Untouched since its major remodelling in 1710 by Edward Dryden, the Elizabethan manor house with an unusual square tower boasted a virtually intact but decaying interior, with good quality panelling, a magnificent plaster ceiling in the Great Chamber, alongside the rare distinction of a privately owned place of worship, and a garden planned in the eighteenth century. It was an historian's dream, an untouched time-warp spanning many centuries, but with the

[21] Cornforth, J. (1981) *Country Life* 169, p.930.

added accompaniments of death-watch beetle, bowing walls, and a deeply unstable tower. ' [22]

Rodney Melville MCs, DipArch ARIBA of the John Osborne Partnership of Leamington Spa was appointed principal architect for the project, with the Linford Building Group, based in Cannock, Staffordshire, specialists in historic restoration, as the main contractor. Linford's description of property in 1982 makes solemn reading: 'the remaining seventy acres of the estate were ''a wilderness of dead elms, docks and thistles; the garden was a jungle....the house riddled with dry rot....roofs were unsound...the garden front bowing outwards and threatening, among other things, to bring down the marvellous plasterwork ceiling of the Great Chamber.'[23]

The south wall proved the biggest problem and was tackled first. In 1980 the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings had carefully documented the distortion of the south wall, from which information the structural engineers had prepared a contour map. 'Lengthways [the wall] is split into two parts by the tower, and each of these had bulged outwards by about 100mm at the top midway along its length. When panelling and other finishes were taken off it was found that the construction was a thin ashlar [blocks of cut dressed stone] skin about 100mm thick externally, stone facings about 250mm thick internally and a soft loose rubble core to make up a total thickness of 900mm.'

Large timbers built into the inner faces of the walls were found to be decayed. 'Above ground floor level there was no bond at all between the outer wall and cross-walls,' the rotted timbers having ceased to act as ties. It was described as 'very unsafe...even scaffolding and shoring, which ran the length of the wall, had to be erected very carefully indeed.' The decaying timbers were cut out, and lightweight 'reinforced concrete binding beams' were carefully inserted. 'In some places the exterior walls are built on soil higher than the cellar floors,' which

[22] *Building Design* (1981) 534, p.5.
[23] Gundry, D.R.M.(1982) Building Technology and Management 20,` p.8

necessitated underpinning. 'The wall was so fragile that no pressure could be applied.' So delicate was the state of the building that Linford had to limit the number of men working on it.

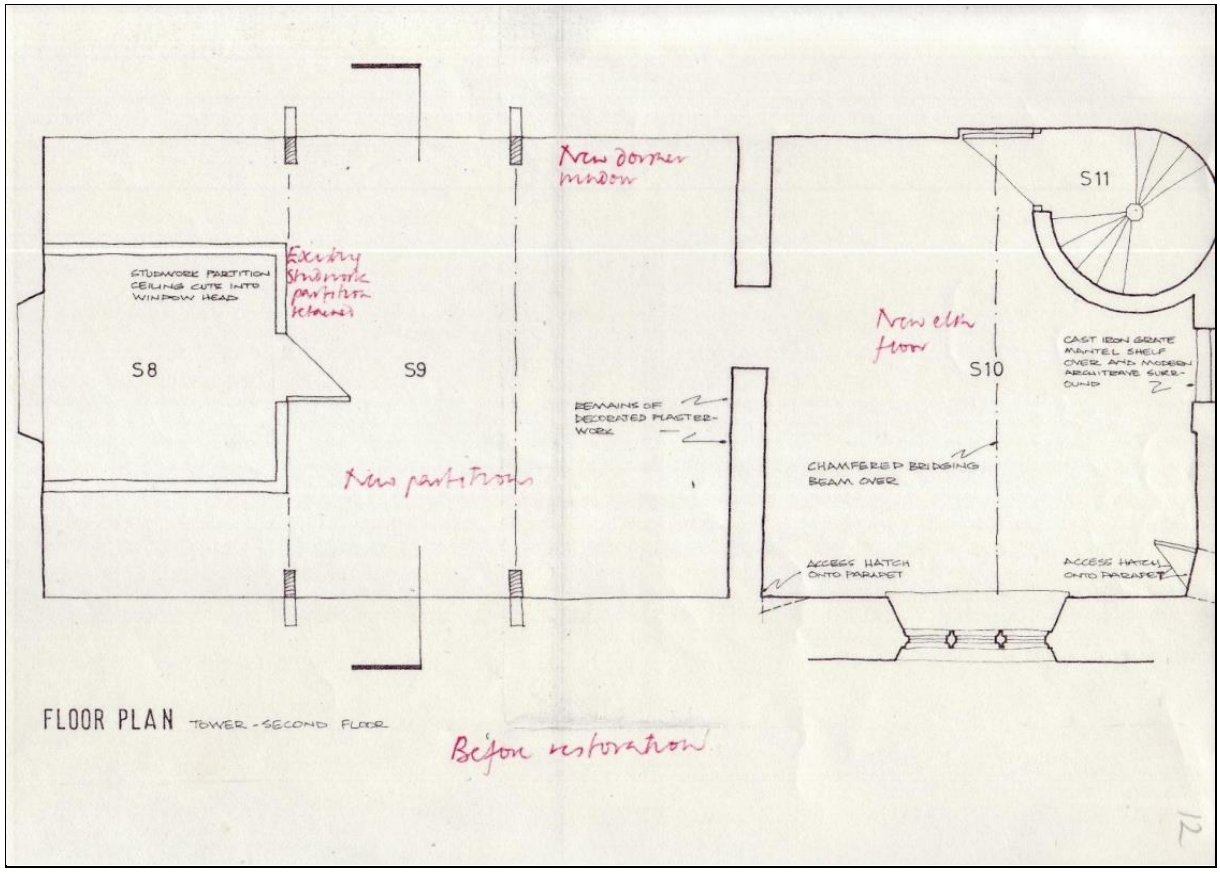
'An unexpected problem arose when an ancient garderobe chute was discovered at one corner of the structurally weak tower'; this meant that the intended system of vertical columns tied with horizontal beams, in lightweight Lytag concrete to support the tower had to be revised. Once this revision was in place Linford were able to remove the parapet walls for rebuilding and rendering. 'Hard cementitious rendering applied by past owners [c. 1930s] had resulted in widespread frost damage in the Tudor brickwork, in both walls and tower.' These were all removed and replaced with a 'weak lime-based render, prepared from 'Derbyshire lump lime slaked on site,' (a process of heating limestone) with great attention being made to colour matching described as 'mellow buff.' Jackson Stops recalls one rather nasty addition to the cement rendering at the top of the tower – 'a cigarette packet dated 1936.'

Linford Building also had to tackle another problem; it was discovered that the west wall to the tower's 'main timber supporting beam had failed at its bearing end and also that the masonry to this tower wall was only supported on 75-100mm studding.' This necessitated more underpinning and steel strapping to the main beam, which was a delicate process. Linford had an ongoing apprenticeship scheme during the restoration training young people in various crafts. Some of their apprentices who started at the beginning of the Canons Ashby project had in fact completed their training by the end of the project. In the main house panelling and windows went through painstaking restoration processes. The original sycamore floors were replaced or repaired. Linford described how 'six year old timber is to be rough cut and laid in the rooms for some months – to match the moisture content of the building – before it is finally planed and machined.' Internal plasterwork – using hair plaster where necessary – was restored, along with the ornate weather-vane which was reinstated on the tower.

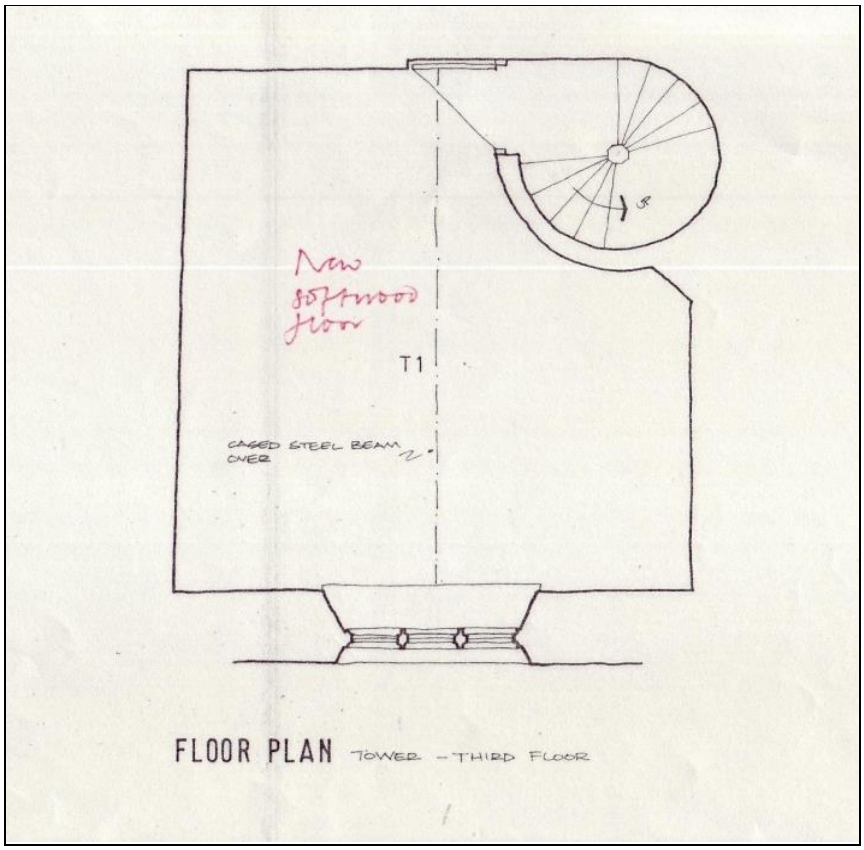
Jackson Stops recounted how Sir Henry Dryden's detailed drawing of the weathervane was vital to this restoration process.[24]

More specifically in the tower Charlotte Haslam, the then Historian of the Landmark Trust, described how 'The top tower room needed a new floor; the lower room also had a new floor, but this time of elm boards, not softwood as elsewhere.' This is indicated in the restoration plans overleaf, as are the new partitions. 'The doors were repaired and re-hung, with new latches copying the originals, which no longer worked. The windows on the south side needed some repairs; they are all made of clunch, the name given to chalk used for building.' This is an unusual stone to use for external architectural detail because of its softness. It probably came from Buckinghamshire or Bedfordshire, and is one of the four different stones used in the building of Canons Ashby.

[24] Gundry, D.R.M. (1982) *Building Technology and Management* 20, pp. 8-10. *Building* (1984) 246, p.48



Restoration Plans of the Second and Third Floor of the Tower (1982)



The dilapidated state of the tower rooms can be seen in these 1965 photographs.[25]

The Lower and Upper Tower Rooms c. 1965

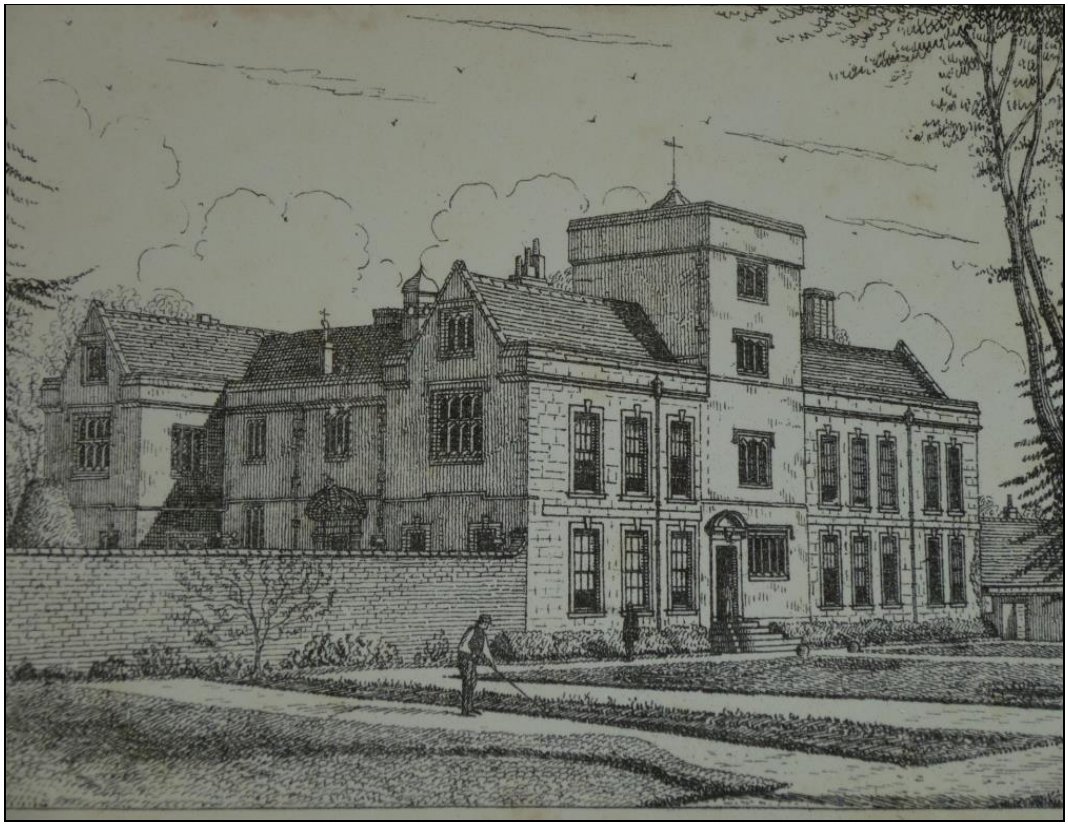
[25] Haslam, C. (1985) Restoration Notes.

Conclusion

Gervase Jackson-Stops' report on the house was later published In *Building* magazine in which he described the National Trust's guardianship of Canons Ashby 'rescued from what seemed certain devastation' as 'the most exciting acquisition…in recent years.' The aim, he wrote, was to restore the house 'largely to its appearance in the 1921 Country Life photographs,' as seen in the frontispiece of this history. The house, garden and church were opened to the public for the first time in April 1984, after a three year restoration. John Cornforth writing in *Country Life* described the restoration of 'arguably the most encouraging individual preservation package to have been worked out for a number of years.' He also stated that the £100,000 offered to the National Trust by the Manifold Trust was an 'act of great generosity as well as psychological valve, because it meant that the Trust would not be approaching other bodies and individuals with a completely empty bowl.'[26]

The story of Canons Ashby and its tower was a restoration triumph that set a precedent in the 1980s for future country house restorations. As an architectural type, a tower is an exciting and rather romantic form, giving access to a way of living at once more confined physically, but more expansive metaphysically, than conventional accommodation – not a bad description for a stay in many of Landmark's buildings.

[26] *Building* (1984) 246, p.44. Cornforth, J. *Country Life* (1981) 169. p.1026.



Engraving of Canons Ashby (undated), Northamptonshire Record Office

Many centuries later the poet G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) encapsulates the essence of the tower in his poem *Towers of Time*: Englishness and strength, touched with the freedom of spirit for which the British democracy has long been renowned. The longevity and history of the tower at Canons Ashby and that of the Dryden family seems to sit happily with his sentiment.

> Thou wilt not break as we have broken
> The Towers we reared to rival Thee
> More true to England than the English
> More just to freedom than the free.

Bibliography

Bindoff, S.T. (1950, 1991) *Tudor England*.
Brunskill, R.W. (2002) *Traditional Buildings of Cumbria.*
Brunskill, R.W. (1981, 1992) *Traditional Buildings of England.*
Building Design (1981) 534. 'Dryden's estate wins half of budget.'
Cornforth, J. *Country Life* (1981) 'Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire.'
Cowells Press. *Canons Ashby* (undated) Northamptonshire Record Office.
Curl, J.S. (1999) *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture*.
Garnett, O. (2001, 2009) *Canons Ashby* - The National Trust Handbook.
Girouard, M. (2009) *Elizabethan Architecture*.
Gotch, J.A. (1905) *Canons Ashby*.
Gotch, J.A. Country Life (1921) 49 'Canons Ashby -1 Northamptonshire.'
Gotch, J.A. (undated) *Northampton and Oakham Architectural Society* 'Renaissance Architecture in Northamptonshire.'
Gotch, J.A. (1889/1890) *RIBA Transactions* 'The Renaissance in Northamptonshire' 2nd series, 6.
Gotch, J.A. (1936) *The Old Halls and Manor Houses of Northamptonshire*.
Gundry, D.R.M. (1982) *Building Technology and Management,* 20.
Haslam, C. (1985) *Restoration Notes.*
Inventories to the Tower 1717, 1756 & 1819. Canons Ashby Archives.
Jackson-Stops, G. (1984) *Building*, 246, 'Canons Ashby House Report.'
Jackson-Stops, G. October 1994. Lecture to Northamptonshire Record Society. Northamptonshire Archives.
Latham, C. (1904-9) *Country Life – In English Homes,* 2.
Lee, M. (1994) *Larousse Dictionary of British History*.
Melville, R.S. (1982) *RIBA Transactions* 1, 'Canons Ashby.'
Online Poetry Archives (2011) Dryden, J. (1687) *A Song For St Cecilia's Day.*
Chesterton, G.K. (1874-1936) *The Towers of Time.*
Pevsner N. & Cherry, B. (1961, 1973) *Buildings of England Northamptonshire*.
Plumbridge, A. & Meulenkamp, W. (2000) *Brickwork Architecture and Design.*
Rich, L. (1981) *The National Trust Magazine,* 13-46, 'Anatomy of a Rescue Operation.'
Summerson, J. (1953, 1991) *Architecture in Britain* 1530-1830.
Vitruvius (Dover Edition, translated by M.H. Morgan 1914, 1960) *The Ten Books on Architecture*
Serlio, S. (1611, Dover Editions 1983) *The Five Books of Architecture*.
Shute, J. (1563, Eebo Editions) *The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture.*
Tillyard, E.M.W. (1943, 1968) *The Elizabethan World Picture*.