

## THE COLLEGE, WEEK ST MARY, CORNWALL

The College was built as part of a chantry school endowed by Dame Thomasine Percival, the widow of Sir John Percyvale (Percival), who was Lord Mayor of London in 1498. A 'chantry' was an institution where prayers were said for the souls of the dead, sometimes combined with education. The College has special significance as one of the earliest schools in England to be founded by a woman. Dame Thomasine founded her school in 1506, the same year that Henry VII's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort founded a school in Wimbourne (now known as Queen Elizabeth's School). The only earlier school known to have been founded by a woman is Lady Berkeley's Grammar School at Wotton-under-Edge (1384). Another reason for Landmark's interest is the similarity of certain features in its architecture with that of Wortham Manor, another Landmark property about 12 miles away on the Devon side of the Tamar.

Thomasine, whose maiden name was Bonaventure, was born in the village of Week St Mary around 1450 and there is a romantic story that she met her eventual husband, a London wool merchant called Richard Bunsby, while tending sheep on the moor. The tale has been told by many Cornish writers, including Parson Hawker (in 'Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall', which is on the College bookshelf). However, more recent research has revealed that Thomasine was of gentler birth, one of five offspring to Joan & John Bonaventure. She perhaps went to London in service to the household of a wealthy merchant, as country girls often did as part of their upbringing. Her first husband was called not Richard Bunsby but Henry Galle, and he was a London tailor rather than a wool merchant. When he died in 1466, she re-married within the year to Thomas Barnaby, another tailor, but this was a short marriage as he died in 1467. At an unknown date she married for a third time, a third tailor, John Percyvale, whose ambition in City circles was noted by his contemporaries. In 1487 he was knighted and was elected lord mayor of London in 1498. He died in 1503, founding in his will a grammar school in Macclesfield, where he was born.

This probably formed the template for Thomasine's school in her own Cornish birth parish in Week St Mary, a school she endowed in 1506. At Percyvale's death, she became a very wealthy widow, left as mistress of a 'mansion' in Lombard Street. Here she also housed and educated five 'alms-children', both boys and girls, as well as taking on apprentices. She had no children of her own, but clearly cared about the education of the young, and was conventionally pious, making her schoolmaster responsible for saying masses for her soul in the parish church of St Mary nearby, as well as for her husband and parents. This made her school a 'chantry school.' The foundation deed specified the stipend of the schoolmaster, who was to be a graduate of Oxford or Cambridge, and was assisted by an assistant teacher or muncible, and a laundress. The school's service buildings were set around a small quadrangle, rather like an Oxbridge college in miniature.

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](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)

When Thomasine died in 1512, her will left the school to the discretion of her relation John Dinham of Wortham as 'he knoweth my mynde'. The school was initially successful and valued by the community, but its chantry role fell foul of the new religious practices after Henry VIII's Reformation. In 1547, ten-year old Edward VI came to the throne with the reforming Duke of Somerset as his regent or Lord Protector. A 1548 Commission reported that the school was 'now utterly decayed by reason that it standeth in a desolate place and farre from the Market for the provision of the said Schollers'. At the decree of the Lord Protector, it was merged with one in Launceston.

From 1549-1725 the buildings were owned by the Prideau family, who sold them in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to Thomas Pitt, first Lord Londonderry. His sister Lucy married the first Earl of Stanhope in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the property came through her to the Stanhopes. The 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Stanhope sold it in 1910, together with his Holsworthy estate. Mr Colwill, from whom Landmark bought it, had lived at the College all his life, as had two generations of the Colwills before him. Over the years, the buildings that remain of the former College had been partially demolished to suit changing uses, its materials used for other village buildings, but enough survives of the College to give us some idea of the imposing group that stood on the site in the reign of Edward VI.

Unfortunately there is nothing to suggest the form of the Tudor roof, floor beams and screen of the original building, but it is probable that they were as those at Wortham, Trecarrell and Cotehele, all buildings in the locality which were extended at the end of the fifteenth century or beginning of the next. The present roof trusses are not difficult to date and are of rough carpentry which the builders always intended to conceal above the ceiling, but it is probable that the first floor was inserted and the roof replaced in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century when the windows on the north elevation were also changed to wood casements and a culm oven built into the medieval fireplace.

The Landmark Trust has removed the more recent partitions and staircase, repaired and reinstated those features of the early buildings which survived, and altered the accommodation so that people may come and stay, and enjoy the atmosphere of the College. The College consists of a large sitting-room, dining room and kitchen on the ground floor with a bathroom and three bedrooms on the first floor. The first floor was replaced slightly below the seventeenth-century level, so that the heights of the first floor window sills on the north side are still convenient, but because the original turret stairs were dangerously steep it was decided to lower the landing to about 2 feet it was merged with one in Launceston below the bottom of the granite jambs of the mediaeval arched doorway at the head of the stairs. The roof timbers were repaired and the roof covering of used rag slates was laid to continue the colour, texture and scale of other roofs on the neighbourhood.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The College sleeps up to 5 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*