The Landmark Trust

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ABBEY GATEHOUSE, TEWKESBURY, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

In January 1539, on the orders of King Henry VIII, the Abbot of Tewkesbury and the monks of his Chapter accepted the dissolution of their monastery and surrendered their property. The buildings of the great Benedictine abbey were divided by the administrators (the "King's Visitors") into two categories: "superstitious buildings to be destroyed", and those that were "convenient to be preserved". The abbey church fell into the former group but was rescued by the townspeople, who declared that it was their only parish church; accordingly it was transferred to them for the value of its lead and bells – £483. The other "superstitious" buildings were demolished.
The second group consisted of domestic and agricultural buildings that could foreseeably come in useful to a new owner. These included not only the Abbey's kitchen, pantry, bakehouse, brewhouse, stables, slaughterhouse and barns, but also the buildings called the Newark (the "new work", dating from about 1500, which were incorporated with the abbot's lodging to form what is now the Abbey House) and the "great gate entering the court, with the lodging over the same".

Although a gatehouse must have stood in this position for centuries, in 1540 the one that survives today was relatively new: stylistic details indicate that it was probably built either just before or soon after 1500. The upper chamber served as a lodging, probably for one of the officers of the abbey, lay or monastic, or perhaps one of the "guests" who crowded many abbeys of the time, elderly benefactors who looked on it rather like an old people's home. But little is known of its functions after the closure of the abbey: such buildings were often used for parochial or manorial purposes, perhaps as a courtroom or a lock-up, but there is no written record of how the Gatehouse was used during this period.

Engravings of the late 18th century show that it was by then a roofless ruin, and it remained so until about 1849. The 19th-century Age of Restoration was just beginning, and the then owner John Martin, a Ledbury man who was M.P. for Tewkesbury, courageously undertook its rescue. Under the careful direction of the architect James Medland, undesirable outbuildings were removed, and much of the masonry of the walls was taken down and rebuilt, the stones being replaced precisely in their former positions. A new carved timber roof with stone corbels and new lead was provided, the vault over the gate passage was rebuilt, and a few years later the massive oak doors were set in place.

After its restoration the Gatehouse seems to have settled back into its previous ornamental but empty existence, serving as a rather grand lodge to Abbey House. The latter was given a new south front in 1825, together with "alterations which modern ideas of comfort could not fail to suggest" and later became the Vicarage. The Gatehouse was thereafter put to various parish uses: the Girl Guides met there, and at one time an artist used it as a studio. It was reroofed again in the 1970s, after which a new occupier was sought, but the awkward access up the narrow winding stairs to the upper room made this difficult (as it must always have done).

Then a neighbour of the Gatehouse suggested that the Landmark Trust might be interested in it; she knew that difficulty of access would not deter it from taking on a good building – and she was right. A lease was duly negotiated, and Landmark took over the Gatehouse in 1986.

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RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

When the Trust took on the Abbey Gatehouse, its principal task was to make it habitable. To fit in a kitchen, a bathroom and space in which to eat and sleep, all comfortably within a single room to which no addition could be made, required some ingenuity. Under the direction of the architect Andrew Brookes of Rodney Melville and Partners, the solution of a gallery, appearing like an organ case within this rather ecclesiastical space, gradually evolved.

This was just the beginning, however. The nearly-new roof was already leaking; a new roof was designed, which allowed for greater insulation and better ventilation now that the building was going to be inhabited. The ribbed stone vault over the entrance arch was showing signs of weakness, and inside the main chamber the floor tiles were coming loose because the mortar in which they were set was crumbling. The two problems were solved together: the tiles were carefully lifted, the old fill was dug out (part of a gravestone was found in it), and then the stones of the vault were secured by fixing stainless steel ties to the back of the ribs. Lightweight reinforced concrete was then poured on to provide a firm base for the tiles.

Several of the Victorian iron window casements needed repair; much of the existing glass was of an unsatisfactory quality, so this was replaced with hand-made French glass, together with new leadwork. A new oak entrance door was provided, but that at the top of the stairs, opening into the main chamber, is old.

The whole of the plaster was covered with six coats of limewash. Some of the original stones of the chimney breast had been left exposed in a previous restoration, but it was decided that they should now be limewashed along with the rest of the wall. The fireplace lintel was badly cracked, and had to be carefully pinned. A new hearthstone was provided, and then the new stove was fitted.

An unexpected problem proved to be the installation of services, both water and electricity, in an invisible way, without unsightly pipes draping the exterior of the buildings. The architect's solution was to drill ducts diagonally up through the core of the wall, a job that proved extremely tricky but was ultimately satisfactory.

Now the gallery could be fixed, and then it was possible to re-lay the tiles that had been taken up when work started. Many of them were worn, so the whole floor was given a polish with beeswax and turpentine. There was some debate concerning the colour of the ceiling: plain wood and red lead were both considered, but the final choice was as close as possible to the blue with which the Abbey chancel had recently been limewashed, which itself was matched to a fragment of early paint.

A major problem now presented itself: how was furniture to be taken into the building? The stairs were too narrow for all but small objects. The larger pieces had to be carried upstairs in bits and then assembled inside the upper room; the armchair and sofa had to be upholstered there too. It is hoped that they never have to leave.

The restoration was a complex task but the builders, John and Geoff Baylis and their men, together with specialist subcontractors all working to the highest standards of craftsmanship, have achieved a wonderful end result – a building that looks as if it has hardly been disturbed. So now you may stay where the 16th-century monks walked and feel yourself part of a world long gone, yet somehow here not dead.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays to pay for their future maintenance. Abbey Gatehouse sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk