

## THE ANCIENT HOUSE, CLARE, SUFFOLK

The Ancient House is one of the best known houses in Suffolk, situated on the High Street in Clare opposite the main entrance to the parish church, St Peter and St Paul. Its chief glory lies in the rich, boldly moulded pargeting - the plaster decoration that covers its north facade. Supporting the chamber window is a finely carved oak bracket containing the arms of the Hamelden family, supported by two leaf-clad woodwooses (wild men of the woods). The Hameldens probably built the house, and they may have installed a chantry priest or perhaps lived here themselves. It has been known as the Ancient House since about 1810 when an engraving with that title appeared in the *Antiquarian and Topographical Cabinet*.

No one can be sure about the original form of the Ancient House. It seems likely that a 14th century house, possibly incorporating a shop, lay along the High Street. At the north end of this there was a cross wing (now the front room of the Museum). At the end of the 15th century an architectural show piece was added behind the cross wing, and the orientation of the house changed so that it faced the church rather than the street. The newer part comprised the massive front door and hall; the parlour with its very fine ceiling; and a chamber above, each with a room behind. The carved leaf stops on the ends of the floor joists are similar to ones in Clare Priory and the Bell Hotel, and may have all been carved by the same family. Access to the first floor chamber was probably by a steep staircase winding down from the archway immediately to the south of the present bedroom door.

The older part along the High Street was probably replaced in the 17th century with a two-storey wing incorporating the chimney. Later on, certainly before 1810 and possibly about 1767, the original staircase serving the chamber was removed; a new door was made into the chamber, the front door was blocked up, and a new staircase serving the first floors of both parts of the house was inserted.

There are two types of pargeting - raised and incised work and the Ancient House has both. The craft was particularly popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, and it was often used to cover timber-framed buildings in Suffolk. Alec Clifton-Taylor, in *The Pattern of English Building*, mentions watching two elderly pargeters working on repairs there with a compound of lime and sand, horsehair and horsefat. The nature of lime plaster means that eventually it has to be renewed, and as a result the designs and date on the Ancient House have changed over time. On the west gable there is the date '1473', but it had been 1672 at the beginning of this century. The shield of three chevrons is that of the de Clare family.

In the 1920s an American offered to buy the Ancient House with the intention of shipping to the USA, but Charles Byford pre-empted this offer and subsequently presented the house to Clare Parish Council. In 1978 the ground floor of the Ancient House opened as a local history museum, with the curator's flat above

## **RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST**

By 1992, the building needed major repairs to enable the museum use to continue. Clare Parish Council approached the Landmark Trust to see if it could help in any way. It became clear that if the Trust took over part of the building for holidays, the Museum could stay in the other half. A successful application was then submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund and in 1999 work began re-ordering the Ancient House to provide a Landmark in the eastern half, with the Museum on the High Street side. The internal restoration has been done with a 'light touch' working with Philip Orchard of the Whitworth Co-Partnership as our architect and F A Valiant and Son as our builder.

The most significant change to the appearance of the front of the house has been the reinstatement of the front door. When the present staircase was put in, the front door was blocked up and another opening made to the side of the parlour window. We blocked this later door, thereby improving that room, and made a new oak front door. A brick floor was discovered at the entrance and this was extended into the hall. The door from the hall to the parlour had been lowered, but we found the original doorhead and, with difficulty, fitted a new door.

The parlour with its large fireplace has been made into the sitting room. Later window sills were removed in here (and the bedroom) to reveal the knarled and knobbly originals. The asphalt floor was taken out and re-laid with reclaimed pammments. The fireplace bressumer was badly damaged, but has now been carefully repaired by splicing in a new piece of seasoned oak into the gap. A kitchen has been made in the room behind the parlour which had been a museum storeroom.

Upstairs, the chamber with its view of the church is now the bedroom. We removed a ceiling that had been put in earlier this century at a lower level than the original, and replaced it with a new one of three coats of lime and haired plaster on riven chestnut laths following the profile of the original. There are new doors to the landing and bathroom and a new floor in the little closet - the original staircase opening. There had been two doors on either side of the fireplace, leading to the caretaker's kitchen on the left, and a bathroom on the right. We took out this later partition and thereby restored the room to its original medieval form. The door to the left we blocked off and made the airing cupboard.

In the bathroom, overlooking the garden, we discovered the original window with its diamond mullions, which we repaired and gave new elm wooden shutters just as it would originally have had. This meant that the later windows were not only unnecessary but also out of place and so we blocked them all up by reinserting studs, green hazel wattles and daub. We discovered the original, steeply sloping floor under years of later flooring and this we have renovated. This whole room is a testament to the concept that timber-framed buildings 'move and breathe'. The whole house was limewashed inside and out, and the gutters removed to improve the appearance. Clare Ancient House Museum is still housed on the ground floor.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Ancient House sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*