

The Landmark Trust

THE BANQUETING HOUSE, GIBSIDE, NR. NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

The Banqueting House is one of several buildings added to the remarkable landscape garden at Gibside for its owner, George Bowes between 1730-60. Besides improvements to the nearby mansion (the home since 1540 of his mother's family, the Blakistons) and James Paine's magnificent chapel begun just before his death in 1760, Bowes also built a Palladian stable Block, an Orangery, a Bath House (vanished), a Column of British Liberty, a Gothic tower (vanished and perhaps never built) and the Gothic Banqueting House itself.

The Banqueting House was built in the 1740s. An inventory of 1746 shows it was in use by then and lists the furniture of its Great Room (6 Windsor chairs, 1 large Windsor chair with 4 seats, prints of Shakespeare, Milton, Swift), Its interior decoration was as elaborate as the exterior, its ceiling and walls covered with an intricate *papier maché* design, for which the architect's original sketch exists. A 19th-century description records mirrors at either end of the Great Room, so that "the company when seated appears almost endless in length". Here the family and their guests would come for picnic meals, perhaps laid out as a surprise feast to be discovered in the course of a long tour of the grounds. Afterwards they might refresh themselves with music, or stroll on the lawn around the building, enjoying the view of the lake and the grand panorama beyond.

The architect for most of the buildings at Gibside was Daniel Garrett, a former assistant of Lord Burlington's who developed a thriving practice in the North, which he handed on to Paine, in about 1753. Garrett had a particular gift for Gothick design, a decorative style inspired by what was then taken to be the native British architecture, but which had not at that time acquired the scholarly character of the later Gothic Revival. The Banqueting House, with its bowed front and soaring pinnacles, is one of the most extraordinary, and brilliant, buildings of the style.

George Bowes was an extremely talented man, a successful landowner and coal-owner as well as a keen sportsman and a Whig MP. He almost certainly planned the alterations to the landscape at Gibside himself. He was one of those, like John Aislaby at Studley Royal in Yorkshire, who under the influence of designers such as Stephen Switzer, broke away from the intricate formal designs of parks and gardens popular in the 17th century to more natural schemes. At Gibside the whole estate, with abundant woods and hills, fast flowing river and rich pattern of cultivated fields, was brought into relationship with the old house at its centre, to create an ideal world in miniature. There is still a formal framework of avenues and vistas, and a geometrically shaped lake, but between there are irregular woodland plantations, encircling rides and walks that follow a meandering course, with frequent surprise views of the countryside and, of course, of the carefully sited buildings which play so important a part within it.

George Bowes' daughter married the Earl of Strathmore, whose family name then became Bowes-Lyon, and whose descendants still own most of Gibside. The house fell empty before 1900, however, and was dismantled in 1920. Later, the park was leased to the Forestry Commission. The Banqueting House began to disappear beneath the undergrowth, and its roof fell in. Fortunately several people took photographs of it before this happened. New hope arose for Gibside as a whole when in 1965 the chapel and the avenue were given by the 16th Earl to the National Trust, which has therefore been able to reinstate two of the most important elements in the gardens. In 1977, the Landmark Trust offered to take on The

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Banqueting House, to restore it and pay for its future upkeep by letting it for holidays. The Forestry Commission generously gave up their lease of the building, so that in 1981 the Strathmore estate was able to sell Landmark the freehold.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Banqueting House in 1977 was almost entirely roofless and without windows. The central section of the entrance front had collapsed, due to vandalism and neglect. Work began as soon as possible - the condition of the building was too precarious to wait for legal negotiations to be concluded. The architect appointed for the restoration was Ian Curry, of the Newcastle firm of Charlewood Curry. The builders were the local firm, Brown Construction of Rowlands Gill, with Bill Salter of the Decorative Plaster Company of Wideopen brought in to do the plasterwork.

First, everything was recorded in its ruinous state, to build up a complete picture of the building before it became derelict. The position of every piece of plasterwork and joinery was carefully noted, the undergrowth was cleared and piles of leaf-mould sifted for fragments of stone, fortunately revealing almost all that had fallen. Local archives were searched for old photographs and drawings, combining to best effect in the reconstruction of the entrance front. A number of curiously shaped stones had been found, but it could not be guessed exactly how they should be fitted together. It was initially proposed instead simply to continue the crenellated parapet all the way along. Then Margaret Hudson, librarian at the Newcastle School of Architecture and authority on the history of Gibside, sent us a photograph of a sketch dating from 1828 that she had found in the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle. This showed clearly the curious decorative gables which rose above the arches of the portico. The stones now made sense, and the building could be restored correctly. Very little new stone was needed, but where it was, the nearest match to the original Streatlam stone was found at the Dunhouse Quarry near Bishop Auckland.

The Banqueting House consisted of just three rooms, the Great Room itself, measuring 32 feet across, which would be used for sitting and eating, and would also contain two sofa beds, and two smaller rooms, one of which would provide space for a double bedroom and the other a kitchen. Two tiny rooms off these, which may have contained stairs up to the roof, provided space for a shower room and a lavatory.

We were able to save the quite substantial areas of plaster decoration that remained on the walls of the bedroom, and missing areas were made up faithfully by Bill Salter. One shutter survived intact, and fragments from six others were pieced together to make one complete pair, now in the bedroom. Fragments of the carved dado rail in the bedroom were copied to make a new rail for the Great Room. The windows were too rotten to save, as was the bedroom door, but enough survived for complete copies to be made. Although we had Daniel Garrett's sketch for the decoration of the Great Room, and a very clear photograph of it taken in about 1900, it was decided only to reinstate the main elements of the design, and not attempt a reconstruction of the complex detail, of which not a trace remained. The chimney piece was discovered buried outside the building, with only minor elements missing. The new floor is of pine, as was the old.

Since work on the building itself was completed, we have concentrated on its setting. The Forestry Commission have kindly allowed the vista to the lake to be cleared and since 1990, have worked alongside the National Trust to open new footpaths and improving public access.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Banqueting House sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk