

# The Landmark Trust

## BEAMSLEY HOSPITAL, NR. SKIPTON, NORTH YORKSHIRE

The inscription above the archway as you enter the Hospital announces that it was founded by Margaret, Countess of Cumberland in 1593, and completed by her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford. Queen Elizabeth gave her consent to the foundation in a special charter. In this the need for a Hospital or Almshouse was explained: the Countess had seen that there were "many old women in and around Skipton, decrepit and broken down by old age, who were in the habit of begging for their daily bread". She wished to offer them the protection of a roof over their heads, and a small income.

After the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII, there were no longer any institutions to look after the poor and needy. Only in 1601 did the Poor Laws make this a duty of local government. Until then, the poor depended purely on the charity of individuals. It was up to the gentry and nobility to set an example in this work, and many of them founded almshouses, to take care of the "deserving" poor. Even after the new laws came in, there was still a need for decent free housing for the old, and almshouses became a regular feature of village life.

The Countess of Cumberland intended her foundation to be for thirteen poor widows: a Mother and twelve Sisters. By her death in 1616, however, only the round building was completed. This contained accommodation for the Mother, who had a tiny bedroom as well as a living room, and for six of the Sisters, with one room each. All the rooms had fireplaces. In the centre of the building, and at the heart of the women's daily lives, was the chapel, in which prayers were said each morning by a specially-appointed Reader. Its unusual design was possibly inspired by the round churches built by the Knights Templar, such as that in the City of London.

The furniture in the chapel today was provided by Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Pembroke, who continued her mother's work at Beamsley. In a deed of 1631, Lady Anne stated that she had, after her mother's death, "erected the greatest part of the said hospital". This refers to the long range facing the road, which used to contain six dwellings, each with a tiny attic. It is possible that she also put the finishing touches to the round building, in addition to furnishing it; and she certainly put the Hospital's finances in order.

The Hospital's income came from two farms, the rents from which kept the buildings in repair and paid the allowances promised to the Mother and each of the Sisters, and to the Reader. To begin with their management was the responsibility of the Mother, but this later passed to the agent of the Skipton Castle Estate, representing the Castle's owner, who was hereditary Chairman of the Trustees. All the Hospital papers, however, were stored in a painted chest in the Mother's room. This still exists, although sadly for its safety it is no longer kept in the building.

The almswomen's lives were lived according to the Rules set out by Lady Anne. How little these changed over the centuries can be seen by comparing the original version overleaf, as recorded by Lady Anne in 1665, with the printed Orders hanging on the wall in the entrance passage, dated 1929.

By the 1950s the buildings at Beamsley were old-fashioned and inadequate, and most of the rooms were empty. A programme of modernisation was carried out 1958-60, and for a few years after this, the Hospital was full. Then numbers started to fall again. With the arrival of

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Council Retirement Homes and Sheltered Housing, the elderly no longer needed the Countess of Cumberland's protection.

In 1983, the Hospital Trustees decided to pass the buildings on to the Landmark Trust, as a charity which specialises in the care of historic buildings. After restoration, the long range is now let to two permanent tenants, while the round building is let for holidays to parties of up to five people, who can live briefly in these curious rooms, with the quiet central chapel in their midst.

## **RESTORATION OF BEAMSLEY HOSPITAL**

When the Landmark Trust took on Beamsley Hospital in 1983, the upper building was basically in sound condition. The main job to be done was the repair of the roof. The stone slates were stripped off, and put on one side for re-use. All the joinery was checked and repaired, before the slates were put back. Laying them evenly on a continuous curve was a very tricky job.

The building consists of two stone drums, one inside the other, with the inner drum, containing all the chimneys, rising up through the roof of the outer. The top of the inner drum also contains the windows of the chapel. Its walls had been rendered with cement in 1960, but this was now cracked and broken. It was all cleaned off, therefore, and the stonework beneath repaired and repointed. The chimneys were also repointed. To begin with, these were left without their odd assortment of chimney pots, but looked curiously stumpy and unfinished without them. Once they were back in place, the building regained its full character.

In 1958-60, new partitions had been inserted, to provide small kitchens and bathrooms for the almswomen. These were now stripped out to return the building to more nearly its original arrangement of seven wedge-shaped rooms, all but two opening into the chapel. The uses of the rooms have changed, however, to provide the separate sitting, sleeping, cooking, washing and eating rooms which are more appropriate for the Hospital's modern use as a single holiday dwelling.

At the same time, modern fireplaces were stripped out to reveal the Elizabethan openings behind. New elm floorboards were laid in place of modern softwood floors. New leaded lights were provided for all the windows. A new kitchen and bathroom were installed and the building was redecorated throughout, and furnished in an appropriate manner.

The chapel remains just as it was, little changed since the 17th century, complete with bible and hymn books. A record exists of the doors being painted in "grained oak colour" in 1810. The new doors in the rest of the building have been painted to match. The bell is very popular with children!

Outside, concrete has been replaced by new stone paving. The roadside building has also been restored, and converted into two cottages which now provide homes for local people.

## THE RULES OF BEAMSLEY HOSPITAL IN 1665

1. That Prayers be daily said everie morning about Eight or Nyne a Clock by the Reader for the tyme being. And that the mother and all the Twelve Sisters give their constant attendance at the said Prayers and none of them to be absent at any tyme unless in Case of Sickness or other urgent occasions.
2. That none of the Sisters be out of the house without the leave of the Reader who Prayeth with them and the mother of the said Almshouse.
3. That none of their children or grandchildren or any other shall lye with the Sisters in the said Almshouse without the leave of the said Reader or mother wch leave shall not be granted but only in case of Sickness or other Reasonable occasion.
4. That the out doors of the Almshouse may be constantly locked up everie night at Eight a Clock in the winter and Nyne in the somer and not to be opened in the morning till Seven a Clock in the winter and Six in the somer.
5. That none of the Sisters do Run on the Score in the Towne because they have their allowance paid them constantly.
6. That the Almshouse court be swept over everie week, and the runnells and watercourses about it kept clean.
7. That the mother allso herself observe these orders.
8. That the mother and Sisters do all of them Indevour to live peaceably and quietly among themselves.
9. That if any difference shall arise amongst any of the Sisters or mother and Sisters, Itt may be determined between the Major Part of themselves and the Reader, and in case they cannot end itt then to be refered to the Countess of Pembroke while she liveth and after her death such differences to be referred to the owner of Skipton Castle for the tyme being.
10. That if the mother or any of the Twelve Sisters shall wilfully break any of these orders that for the first fault they shall forfeit a fortnights Allowance to be abated out of the next moneys they are to Receive, and equally divided one half to the Informer and the other half to the poor of the Towne, and for the second fault to be expelled the house.
11. When any other is to succeed in the house they shall submitt to these orders or else they shall not be admitted.

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