The Landmark Trust

THE BIRDHOUSE, BADGER DINGLE

There are times when a single building can epitomise an entire aesthetic movement. The Birdhouse is one such, a Classically-inspired pavilion in an almost impossibly picturesque setting. Its design is attributed with confidence to James Wyatt (1746-1813), one of the most prolific and admired architect-designers of the Georgian period. It was commissioned by the owner of the Badger estate, Isaac Hawkins Browne, a wealthy Midlands coal and iron master with antiquarian tastes inspired by his travels on the Grand Tour. From 1779-83, Wyatt was called in to extend, refront and refurbish the interiors of Hawkins Browne's seat, Badger Hall, which then stood just north east of the church.

Around 1780, Hawkins Browne brought in landscape designer William Emes, who worked in the style of Capability Brown, to enhance the natural qualities of his grounds and of Badger Dingle, a deep ravine on the estate, through which flows a tributary of the River Whorfe. It is generally accepted that Browne also commissioned from Wyatt this pavilion to perch above the scene. Built of the local red sandstone, its Greek Revival style is entirely characteristic of Wyatt's style: exterior fairly plain, the saloon within elegantly decorated and with spectacular views along the gorge from a curved viewing platform. The saloon and service floor below were originally self contained spaces, with their own separate entrances. Behind the pavilion, buried into the hillside behind retaining walls and reached by external stone steps, was a small area, leading into cellar rooms where there was a copper and a range, and from where originally a hot air heating system based on a Roman hypocaust fed into flues in the rear wall.

In 1806 Hawkins Browne acquired the north bank of The Dingle to the west of the village and Emes' partner John Webb still further enhanced The Dingle, damming the stream to form three long pools, creating a network of paths and adding other features: an icehouse (now blocked off), Rotunda and caves. All these are there to explore today. In 1839, the Badger estate was inherited by Hawkins Browne's cousin's son, Robert Henry Cheney. Cheney and his brother Edward were fine art connoisseurs of some reputation. The family owned a *palazzo* in Venice, where in 1850 Edward struck up a friendship with John Ruskin and his young bride Effie. The Ruskins visited Badger Hall in 1850 and 1851 before their marriage came to a public and painful end, and it seems highly likely that one or both visited The Birdhouse (even if John Ruskin is unlikely to have approved of its design). Cheney and Ruskin were often rivals as art critics and collectors, though Ruskin had reluctant regard for Edward Cheney of Badger, who filled the Hall with fine sculpture and art, especially after he inherited the estate in his turn in 1866.

Edward Cheney died in 1884, and the estate passed to his nephew, Colonel Alfred Capel-Cure. His tenure is said to have been the inspiration for Sir Gregory Parsloe-Parsloe's Matchingham Hall in P. G. Wodehouse's Blandings Castle series. Certainly Col. Capel-Cure's own sad end, while dynamiting tree roots on the Badger estate in 1896, might have come straight from Wodehouse.

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

The Birdhouse remained in use until the 1930s under the Capel-Cure family, who maintained a tradition of an annual tea party there at which the family served their servants. The last Mrs Capel-Cure died in 1937. The Hall passed to a nephew and then stood empty. In 1944 the estate and Badger Hall were sold to a firm of London estate agents, John Swire & Sons. The fine contents and fixtures were then sold, and the house was demolished 1952-3. Only a few service buildings remain today, and these date from around 1700, the phase of existence that preceded Hawkins Browne's arrival.

The Birdhouse also fell into complete dereliction. The lead had been stripped from its roof during World War II and this soon fell in, followed by its floors. Vandals kicked out the columns. The building's saviour was not, this time, the Landmark Trust, but rather the Vivat Trust. Vivat was a buildings at risk charity founded in 1981 by architects Niall Phillips and Paul Simons, with a purpose and operation very similar to Landmark's own. The Temple, as the folly was then called, was a triumphant reconstruction and restoration by Andrew Arrol of Arrol & Snell architects in 1995-6, with fallen pieces of masonry salvaged from the undergrowth to restore the brick shell.

The form of the roof was reconstructed from fallen timbers using traditional techniques; today the dome is made of fibreglass rather than lead, after successive thefts. To adapt the folly for holiday use, a staircase was introduced to link salon and service floors, its bannisters for the inserted staircase based on those at Badger Hall. The exterior was rendered in imitation of the 'novel' cement render used by Wyatt.

All who knew Vivat were deeply saddened when, in 2015, the trust was declared bankrupt. Vivat's assets (including the contents of The Birdhouse) all passed to the liquidators. They held their Temple on a lease, and the owner of the remaining Badger estate was happy for it to pass instead to Landmark; given its provenance and the excellence of its restoration, we were equally happy to take it on, not least to help perpetuate the legacy of Vivat, such a worthy ally in the fight to preserve Britain's historic buildings.

Landmark has refurbished The Birdhouse inside and out. The sandstone walls have been repointed, the interior redecorated and refurnished, and a new kitchen has been fitted.

As Landmark already had several 'temples' in our portfolio, we reverted to the name by which the folly was originally known, The Birdhouse (as in an estate map of 1837). We think this was not due to any keeping of birds inside the building, but simply because it is such a fine avian perch, placing its occupants so perfectly among the birds and the trees.