

The Landmark Trust

CAWSEY HOUSE, SOUTH STREET, GREAT TORRINGTON, DEVON

This fine merchant's house, with its elaborately decorated shell hood over the door, appears in nearly every book on Great Torrington and most books on the building of Devon. It served as offices or a club since the 19th century, but it was once a private house, and one that its builder could be proud of.

We know the name of the builder because he did not own the property, but rather leased it from the ancient Town Lands Charity. His name was Giles Cawsey and he was Town Clerk of Torrington from 1698 until his death in 1712. He bought the lease in 1700 and soon started work on a new house: a rainwater head on the front bears his initials, with those of his wife Margaret and the date, 1701.

A renewal of the lease in 1712 records that it was a plot 'on which is now built a very good dwelling house.' The Cawseys were an extensive North Devon family, many of them living in the prosperous port of Bideford. Giles Cawsey was probably a merchant as well as Town Clerk and chose to build his house in the very latest fashion. Similar houses had been built in the 1690s in Bridgeland Street, Bideford, with fronts that anticipate the symmetry of the 18th century.

In these houses, for the first time, prosperous merchants were no longer living over the shop: the ground floor rooms were rather for private family use. Earlier town houses tended to be long and thin, with a yard at the side. In the 1690s they began instead to show their faces to the street, with a central door and rooms on either side. In the Bideford houses, the stair was still tucked away behind one of the front rooms and the main parlour tended to be on the first floor. At Cawsey House, for the first time in this area, the stairs are in the centre and the ground floor room on the left as you enter was clearly the most important in the house.

It is tempting to think that the fine plasterwork in this room and on the door hood was the work of the Abbot family of Frithelstock, near Torrington, one of whom was probably responsible for richly decorated ceilings in John Davie's house, Bideford, now the Royal Hotel, although there is no firm evidence to prove this. To include a group of musical instruments in the design or trophies of war as on the door hood was again a mark of the latest fashion. (We had just finished restoring the plasterwork in the door hood when it was struck by a lorry. The work was re-done and has so far survived intact since!)

Cawsey House remained the home of Giles Cawsey's descendants until the late 19th century. One of them, John Soley (great grandson of Giles' daughter Margaret) was seven times Mayor of Torrington between 1827 and 1865. After his death, however, his home became the Liberal Club.

In the 1920s and still owned by the Town Lands Charity, the house was subdivided for a variety of uses, which continued through the 20th century. In the 1980s, Cawsey House provided space for many groups, including a Masonic Lodge, the Red Cross, the Girl Guides and the Torrington Town Lands Charity itself. While it was thus performing a useful function in the town, the architectural character of the building was not being seen to its best advantage. With the existing tenancies coming to an end over the next few years, the Town Lands Charity felt that it was time to reconsider the future. At about the same time, the Landmark Trust had completed the restoration of the Library and Orangery at Stevenstone, near Torrington. These are of similar date to Cawsey House, and after extensive repairs, were to be enjoyed by a succession of people who would rent them for holidays, providing an income for their future maintenance. The Town Lands Charity suggested that the Landmark Trust might be interested in their building as well. While it was not actually at risk, the Landmark Trust felt that Cawsey House was a very rare survival, widely regarded by local historians as one of the most important town-houses in Devon, both for its fine plasterwork and also because it is surprisingly unaltered inside. Here, in fact, was an opportunity to recover the domestic character of a building whose only future, otherwise, was as an office. In the words of the Trust's founder, Sir John Smith, it would then 'give people the experience, once common but now almost unknown, of quite a grand house, with a garden, in the street of a country town.' As 28 South Street, Cawsey House was bought by the Landmark Trust in 1989, but no work could be carried out until the last of the tenants had moved out in 1990. We named it Cawsey House in 2013 to perpetuate the name of the proud family that built it.

RESTORATION

Cawsey House presents a brick face to the world - unusually constructed of two skins of bricks with the void filled with rubble. Behind this it is in fact a timber framed house. On plan the house is an odd shape, obviously built to fit an existing site, and nothing is quite square. A cobble passageway has been discovered running under the house, showing that an earlier building must have existed. A well, with a vaulted stone top, was discovered outside the back loo.

To everyone's excitement, the original balustrade of the stairs was found inside what looked like a modern partition. The scheme to restore the house was drawn up by the architect, Philip Jebb, who had worked for Landmark on many other buildings. Work got under way in 1993, mainly using our own in-house craftsmen. Sadly, Philip Jebb died in 1995, but the work continued under his successor, Alan Konya. A new kitchen was provided in the plainest room, behind the original parlour, which is now the dining room. The remaining rooms provide two sitting rooms, one overlooking the garden, away from the busy street. On the first floor, apart from restoring the original dimensions of the upper hall, the main work was to reinstate the two rooms at the front (made into one in the 1920s) using evidence on the floors for the line of the partition walls and making a bathroom in the closet between.

The Landmark Trust is a charity that restores neglected historic buildings which might otherwise be lost and gives them a new future by offering them for holidays. The rescue of further buildings at risk relies entirely upon voluntary donations, which can be made by contacting us at the address on the front of this sheet. Cawsey House sleeps up to 7 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday please contact us.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. South Street sleeps up to 7 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.