The Landmark Trust

COOP HOUSE, NETHERBY, NR. CARLISLE

The Coop House is a striking example of the kind of Gothic pavilion with which Georgian gentlemen liked to adorn the landscape around their houses. A hint that it was once something more lies in its name: a coop is a wickerwork basket used for catching fish, a method that dates back at least to the Middle Ages. The Coop House, in fact, overlooked a more sophisticated system than a set of baskets. It stands on a terrace in front of which a series of fish pens could be formed by fixing hurdles into a stone pavement. Next to these was a fish ladder, above which a great stone weir spanned the river. All this was built to take advantage of the plentiful salmon for which the Esk is well known. It seems possible that the coops were in fact holding pens for full-grown fish caught in the river, or breeding pens for raising small fish or fry.

The weir above the coops was first built in 1770 by Rev Dr Robert Graham, the owner of Netherby Hall and combined squire and parson ("Squarson") of Arthuret. Over his 25 years of ownership he carried out a long series of much-praised improvements to his estate, including the building of farmhouses and schools, and his establishment of the salmon fishery was a major part of this. But only a year after its construction, floods swept the weir away. It was rebuilt, and a second time destroyed in the same way. Brindley, the well-known civil engineer, rebuilt it yet again to an improved design incorporating a curved weir instead of a straight one. In 1782 this too collapsed when a huge weight of melting ice piled against it after a hard winter.

We do not know exactly when the Coop House was built - possibly in 1772 - nor do we know the name of its designer nor even the reasons for its construction. Certainly it was an ornament to Dr Graham's fine pleasure grounds, and it would have made a vantage point for watching the salmon fishery, for enjoying the sight of water cascading over the weir and fish leaping in the opposite direction. It may also have provided a shelter above the coops for a bailiff to keep watch for poachers.

As first built, the Coop House was little more than a belvedere of one room, its projecting bay taking full advantage of the view up and down the river. There was no fireplace, and it was entered directly from outside, through the arched south door. Each turret had a tall room on the ground floor, with a smaller space above. That on the west had an unlit basement room as well. Curiously, on the ground floor, the south and west windows of the west turret, and all three windows of the little room above, were blocked from the beginning.

With the failure of the weir, much of the point of the house would have been lost. It might still have come in useful as a base for fishing expeditions, or for the river bailiff, and even for the occasional picnic. But from the late 1780s it probably stood empty for most of the next 100 years or so. It was then turned into a cottage for estate workers. A range was installed under the middle window of the main room, which was then blocked. Bedrooms were made in the turrets, with pitched roofs that cut across the front and back windows; the ones in the east turret were therefore blocked up, as those in the west turret had always been, and new windows were made on the side overlooking the river. On the other side an extra room was added in front of the old main door, and a new front door was made in the east side of this addition.

In the 1930s the cottage was lived in by a shepherd, his wife and their five children, but it became too small for them and they moved to a larger house. After they left the Coop House remained empty, becoming increasingly ruinous as the years went by.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Coop House gently decayed until 1989, when a neighbour suggested to Sir Charles Graham, Robert Graham's descendant, that the Landmark Trust, as a charity that specialises in the restoration of buildings of architectural or historic importance, might take it on - as indeed it was glad to do. The estate granted a lease in 1992, and work started in 1994, under the direction of the architect Rosalind Taylor. The builders were the North-West division of Laings, under foreman Philip Hingley.

The first task was to clean up the site, clearing away weeds and the build-up of earth inside and out, and the next was to collect together all the fallen stones lying around, to reuse in rebuilding the central bay. A large tree had grown in the terrace wall in front of the house, and the roots had burst the stonework apart: the upper three courses of the parapet had therefore to be taken down and rebedded. The ground behind the wall was dug away to allow a damp-proof membrane to be laid round the bay, and finally the whole area was paved.

The walls of the bay still existed up to the window sills. The stone head of the central window was found, and one length of jamb. The rest were made to match in St Bees stone, the closest match available. Extra rubble stone for the walls came from the same quarry, as did the new coping stones for the crenellated parapet. These had all disappeared, but the design of the new ones was derived from an old engraving.

The whole building leans towards the river, but only on the west was there any sign of instability. The foundations on this side were therefore strengthened, and steel ties inserted to hold the front and back walls together. All the walls were repointed, and then the new roof could go on. The pockets of the old roof timbers were still visible, but to allow headroom for the new gallery planned to link the two turrets inside, the main roof was made with a flatter pitch than the old one. In the turrets new pitched roofs were formed, following the line of the 19th-century ones. Their eaves project slightly forward of the turret walls and so would have showed above the back parapet; there was, however, room to fit in a half-crenellation at each end, behind which the eaves could be hidden.

On the south a porch was added, with a similar profile to the old back kitchen. Inside, the original paving stones were uncovered beneath a layer of soil. They were carefully numbered and then lifted, so that a damp-proof membrane could be laid before they were put back. Matching second-hand stones were found for the ground-floor bedroom, and new ones for the porch. A fireplace was made where the Victorian range had been, with a new stone surround and a cleverly fitted fireback made by a Carlisle blacksmith, Byers Brothers.

All the joinery in the building is of course new. The construction of the staircase called for some ingenuity since none of the walls around it was straight: the newel post in fact acts as a fixed point for a tie holding the front wall. Kitchen and bathroom, and the services that make them work, are also new, all wires and pipes having been specially laid down the track or across the fields from the opposite direction. As a final flourish, the gallery was given a balustrade of suitably piscatorial design, made by a Dorset blacksmith, Francis Russell, with the Graham family crest adorning the porch to welcome Landmarkers.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Coop House sleeps up to 3 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.