

The Landmark Trust

THE EGYPTIAN HOUSE, PENZANCE, CORNWALL

In 1834 John Lavin, bookseller, of Penzance, bought two cottages in Chapel Street for £396, and proceeded to raise the height of the building and to add to its street front a remarkable neo-Egyptian facade. The Royal Arms on the building suggest that it was complete before the accession of Queen Victoria in June 1837.

John Lavin sold maps, guides and stationery in the Egyptian House, but his main business was in minerals which he bought, sold and exhibited here. The exotic building set out to emphasise the bizarre and beautiful side of geological specimens and draw visitors to the town into the shop. At the time there was much enthusiasm for the study of minerals and fossils, particularly in Cornwall. The railways and the fashion for the seaside brought the tourist (Cornwall's principal business today), and because of the mining industry, the county was a centre of scientific knowledge and enthusiasm. Cornish miners and engineers were carrying their expertise all over the world. Many of the rare specimens sold by Lavin in Chapel Street were found by Cornish miners while at work in the county; others were brought to him by sailors from overseas.

John Lavin married Frances Roberts in 1822 and they had two children, Edward and John. John, the younger, emigrated to Australia leaving Edward to run a stationery, bookbinding and printing business in the Egyptian House beside the mineral shop renting the premises from his father. Perhaps Edward was not keen on geology, because in 1863 a few years after his father's death, he sold the entire collection of minerals for £2500 to the great Victorian philanthropist, Angela Georgiana, Baroness Burdett-Coutts. With the proceeds he built a large hotel on the esplanade at Penzance, which he called Lavin's Hotel (now the Mount Bay's House Hotel).

Motifs Egyptian architecture (obelisks, pyramids, sphinxes etc) were used throughout the history of European architecture, most often for funerary monuments. Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798-9 brought more accurate scholarship, and a greater range of forms and ornaments became available to architects. As well as scholarly designers like Thomas Hope (1769-1831) who designed furniture and interiors, the Egyptian style also appealed to those looking for novelty and publicity, and the Egyptian House seems to be one such example.

The architect, if any, has never been identified. Peter Robinson, who advised the Prince of Wales on the Chinese furnishings at the Brighton Pavilion, was a successful country house architect. He designed an 'Egyptian Hall' in Piccadilly, London for a collection of curiosities, largely as advertising for its owner William Bullock. But there any further similarity ends. John Foulston was closer to hand, a Plymouth architect who used any number of styles. His 'Classical and Mathematical School' was built in the Egyptian style and criticised at the time for being an imitation of Robinson. It still stands somewhat altered as the 'Odd Fellows Hall' but there is no other evidence to link Foulston to the Egyptian House.

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LATER HISTORY AND RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Lavin family owned the Egyptian House until 1910, letting it to a variety of different tenants and shopkeepers. After the death of George Lavin and his mother Georgina, it was sold to William and Fanny Legg (Drapers) of 8 Chapel Street. Their heirs sold it to the Cornish Stone Company in 1951, who sold it in turn in 1968 to Landmark. At this time it was divided vertically into two flats with two staircases. The shop in No 6 was empty, and the flat above occupied since 1962 by Mrs Crichton. Mr Duckham had a millinery shop in No 7, and lived over it as he had since 1960.

Little had been done to the building since the alterations made by John Lavin, and the roof, with its small flanchéd peg slates, was in poor condition. The walls - granite for the back and sides, brick chimneys, and brick and stucco for the Egyptian front - were also in a poor state, with the front beginning to come away from the side walls. Much of this was in need of repointing. The front had been repainted at some time in the 1950s, but the plaster itself was cracked, and some of the detail coming loose. Inside there was dry rot in the basement and ground floor, and woodworm throughout.

Work began on the repair of the building in 1970, converting it into three flats, each running the whole width of the building, with two shops below. The roof was renewed completely, with a new frame designed to prevent the walls from spreading any further. The back wall had been rendered, and this was stripped off, the stonework made good and repointed. The bow window of the staircase, part of Lavin's remodelling, was repaired, and given an inner skin to make it more draft proof. A new window was made in the north wall of the third floor, to light the bedroom, and the windows in the rear wall on all floors were enlarged, again to give more light.

Inside, the dry rot was eradicated, the floors treated and also strengthened, and new floor made up where the extra, and now unnecessary staircase had been. The remaining staircase was given a curved inner wall, to balance the curve of the window. New kitchens and bathrooms were fitted.

Before anything was done to the exterior, paint scrapes were taken, and on the basis of these, and on research into the colours used in the Egyptian revival, the scheme for painting was drawn up. When the building was first restored in 1970, it was thought its frontage was made from Coade stone, the famous kiln-fired artificial stone manufactured at Lambeth in London. However, tests done during maintenance in 2013 revealed that it is in fact a cast, cementitious formulation. The modelling too is altogether too cheerfully provincial for the Coade manufactory; the sphinxes in particular owe more to the figureheads found on the prows of ships than Coade's fine sculptors. Once repainted, our maintenance has kept the whole looking fresh and jolly. The upper floor windows retain their original sashes and glazing bars, although the ground floor windows had been altered quite early on - at least by the date of an engraving of c.1859, which shows them with plate glass. Luckily, the mortices were still there in the sashes, and working from these, and from engravings of Robinson's Egyptian Hall, and Foulston's Library, the existing pattern of glazing was worked out. Thanks to Landmark's intervention and care, this eccentric building remains part of Penzance's character, shining out to startle the seagulls in Lavin's showcase front.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The three apartments in the Egyptian House sleep up to 3, 4 and 4 people respectively. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.