

The Landmark Trust

FOX HALL, CHARLTON, WEST SUSSEX

The Charlton Hunt

From the 1670s until 1750, the village of Charlton was the headquarters of a famous Hunt, once the most fashionable in England. The list of its Masters alone gives evidence of its exalted status: founded by the Duke of Monmouth and Lord Grey of Uppark, the Hunt went into temporary eclipse after Monmouth's Rebellion of 1685; was revived by the former manager of the hounds, Edward Roper (generally known as Squire Roper, a 'gentleman from Kent'), who was soon joined by the Duke of Bolton, the Duke of Monmouth's son-in-law.

After the deaths of Bolton and Roper in 1722 and 1723 respectively, the Hunt was maintained by the 3rd Duke of Bolton, but in 1728 he gave the hounds to his young cousin, the Duke of Richmond, who was now living at Goodwood. The Duke of Richmond was joined in 1729 by the Earl of Tankerville, of Uppark, with whose own Hunt there had apparently been some rivalry, now brought to a close by a splendidly worded treaty, witnessed by four Dukes and aimed to heal 'the Miseries that have of late years wasted and destroyed the County of Sussex'. Although the Earl withdrew two years later, the hounds continued to spend part of the year at Uppark. The Duke of Richmond remained as sole Master until his death in 1750, after which the hounds were moved to Goodwood.

Records of the Hunt were meticulously kept, with a description of each meet, along with pedigrees of the hounds. Hunting was in those days a slow and sedate affair, carried on at a trot, or at most a canter, with few jumps. Horses were changed frequently, and the day lasted from dawn until after dark. The livery of the Hunt, worn by the huntsmen and whippers-in, was a coat of dark blue with gold edgings. It also had its own standard, raised on a flagpole in the village, displaying a running fox on a green ground.

Buildings of the Charlton Hunt

While the purpose of the Hunt was for the enjoyment of sport, equal pleasure was to be had from the gathering of friends, freed from the restraints of Court or London Society. The dinners after the day's chase played an important part in the Hunt mythology, particularly after the building of a fine Room in which to hold them. This was designed around 1720 by no less a person than the architect-Earl, Lord Burlington, and was a single storey pavilion, known variously as the Great Room, the Dome or Fox Hall. Where it stood we do not know, but such slight evidence as there is seems to point towards the southern end of the village. It was demolished at some date after 1750, and its name later passed to this, quite different, building.

The building now known as Fox Hall was put up in 1730 for the joint-Master of the Hunt, the 2nd Duke of Richmond. Contemporary descriptions and records show that while many of the Gentlemen were content to stay in a farmhouse or the inn, some of the grandest and keenest either rented a whole house, or built a new one for themselves. It was clearly necessary for the Master to outshine them all, which he did with this elegant, fashionably Palladian hunting lodge, probably designed by Lord Burlington's former assistant, Roger Morris.

The accommodation inside the Duke's house was simple in arrangement, if lavish in decoration. Entered directly from the stable yard, there were rooms for servants on the ground floor, perhaps with a pantry in which breakfast could be prepared - a silver inventory of 1739 shows that besides candlesticks, the Duke kept a silver coffee pot, tea spoons, strainer and cream jug here. Above was a single apartment for the Duke himself, and no doubt for his Duchess if she decided to accompany

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him, with a 'powder-closet' off it. It has been described as Britain's premier bedsitter, and that is precisely what it is, with a recess for the bed, opening off the main room which would have been arranged very much as it is today. Over the fireplace is a wind-indicator, to tell the Master how the scent would be lying for the day's sport, finally restored to working order with a new weather vane in 2010.

After the Charlton Hunt was moved to Goodwood by the 3rd Duke of Richmond, Charlton returned to being a purely agricultural village. The kennels and some of the lodges were converted into cottages, others were pulled down. Only the Duke's House remained as it was built, maintained no doubt for occasional use, with perhaps a caretaker living on the ground floor. Around the middle of the 19th century, however, it was let to a tenant. The first to be recorded was Mr Thomas Foster, the first manager of the saw mill which started in Charlton between 1850 and 1875. His daughter still lived there at the beginning of this century, but for the most part it continued as the saw-mill manager's house.

Alterations were inevitable. The position of the staircase was changed, blocking a window, but allowing an extra flight to new attic bedrooms. The roof was altered to allow space for these. Windows were pierced in the gables, front and back, and another in the back of the bed recess. The brick walls were rendered over. A description of 1863, however, records that there were still paintings 'relative to the chase' on the walls. In 1961, the Goodwood estate sold Fox Hall to the tenant, Mr Tinniswood. After his death in 1979, his daughter put the house up for sale by auction.

Restoration by the Landmark Trust

The Landmark Trust did not normally compete for buildings on the open market even in the days it was backed by Sir John Smith's Manifold Trust, but in this case the cause seemed so worthy that an exception was made. Fox Hall was crying out for restoration to its original design, and while this could of course have been achieved by an individual owner, such a remarkable building deserves to be more widely shared. Cared for by the Landmark Trust, it is let for holidays, so can be enjoyed by several people in succession, all of whom can wake to the happy prospect of a day spent in the Sussex countryside.

The restoration was carried out under the supervision of the architect Philip Jebb by T. Couzens & Sons. The priorities were the renewal of the roof, to return it to the correct pitch, reinstating cornices to provide a pediment at either end; the blocking of later windows; the removal of the attic bedrooms and the top flight of the stair; and the redecoration of the main room. Where the render had fallen from the walls, detail of the brickwork showed that it had not originally been stuccoed, as might be expected of a Palladian building. So the render was stripped off, and the brickwork repaired. The ground floor window on the front was given a new cill, where this had been cut away. Inside, it was not clear where the original stair had been, so it has stayed in the same place, but turned round to allow the reopening of the window. The bathroom was removed from the hall, and fitted in next to the bedroom instead, where a 'blind' window was opened up to light it.

In the main room, a new oak floor was laid, provided by the Charlton saw mill. The plasterwork was cleaned, repaired and regilded by John Dives. The walls were covered with fabric, as they had been originally, this time from the Gainsborough Silk Mill in Suffolk. The missing dado rail was replaced, copying that in the Chichester Council Chamber, also designed by Roger Morris. The same building provided the surround, which was also missing. It was carved in Chichester Cathedral's workshop from a French stone called Lepine, also used for the fireplace and paving in the hall. Over the fireplace and the doors were frames for pictures. Into these were fitted reproductions of paintings in Goodwood House - Stubbs over the doors, and in the overmantel a Wootton portrait of Sheldon, the 2nd Duke's hunter, held by a groom in Charlton Hunt livery. The restoration of Fox Hall was completed in 1993. Since then, it has played host to a revived Charlton Hunt Club which, for want of the Great Room itself, has resorted here for dinner.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Fox Hall sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.