

# The Landmark Trust

## THE GOTHIC TEMPLE, STOWE, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Stowe has been copiously written about since 1700, both in official guides, and in the impressions of its numerous visitors. Now in the care of the National Trust, the gardens are becoming ever better known and understood. Lord Cobham's Temple of Liberty, as this Gothic building was provisionally known, was built in 1741. It was one of the last additions to the famous garden formed by Charles Bridgeman and his successor, William Kent. The designer was James Gibbs, who had, with Kent, succeeded Vanbrugh as chief architect at Stowe. It seems that it stood empty for a few years, but by 1748 it had its painted glass (much of it from Warwick Priory), and the domed ceiling, with the arms of Lord Cobham's ancestors, was completed after his death in 1749.

Gibbs' original design which survives in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, was altered by the addition of the pepperpot lanterns on the lesser towers and the crocketed pinnacles on the main tower - additions which helped reduce the heaviness of the building. The new Temple was seen very much in ecclesiastical terms. The circular rooms in the towers were called chapels in contemporary guide books and many actually called it the Gothic Church. Entering it in the 18th century must have felt very much like entering some dusky early Christian basilica, which explains why Horace Walpole described it as the Venetian or Mosque Gothic.

As befitted its churchlike character, the Temple was only sparsely furnished, and, unlike many garden pavilions, it is unlikely that it was used for picnics and entertainments, as Stowe had plenty of other buildings for that purpose. It was mainly intended for brief visits in the course of the long tour of the gardens, to include taking in the magnificent views from the top of the tower.

Perhaps with the decorative scheme for the ceiling in mind, the name subtly changed in 1745 "to the Liberty of our Ancestors". To make clear who these ancestors were, Lord Cobham moved the seven Saxon deities, from whom he traced his family, from their original setting and arranged them around his new Temple where they stayed until 1771-2.

The landscape around the Temple evolved too. Walks of varying degrees of complexity were cut through the wood to the north, and on the east, Bridgeman's original straight walk and bastion disappeared under 'Capability' Brown's more informal style. The Temple's wooded setting survived even when the garden was extended further east in the 19th century, and it is only quite recently, with the loss of trees planted in the 18th century that the Gothic Temple has come to have its present more open setting.

Gothic for us today is largely an architectural label, but in the 17th and early 18th century it had a much more potent meaning. Gothic architecture was equated with the Anglo-Saxons, who had come to signify Liberty and Government by Constitution, as against the despotism of the Roman world. Furthermore, the Reformation was interpreted as the North's rescuing of humanity for the second time from the tyranny of Rome. So 'Gothic' came to imply all the moral and cultural values summed up in the term 'Enlightenment'. This whole amalgam of ideas found a home in the Gothic Temple.

Such a declaration was also underlined by the choice of a triangular ground plan, as this shape had come to be particularly associated with Medieval Romanticism, with overtones of a fight against oppression, both political and religious.

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## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

Since the 1920s, the Gothic Temple had been used by Stowe School as an Armoury. A wooden hut had been added on the north side to provide storage space, and most of the first floor windows had been blocked. In 1966 a programme of repair for the garden buildings at Stowe was launched, and it was clear from the survey carried out on the Temple by the architect Hugh Creighton, that the school could not be expected to achieve this task on its own. Accordingly, the then recently founded Landmark Trust offered to take on a lease and pay for its restoration and conversion to a most unusual dwelling.

Once the Armoury had been moved, work started in 1969. The walls were in reasonably good condition, but the parapets and pinnacles needed attention as several of the stones had been broken or damaged by rusting iron ties. The turrets had to be partly taken down and rebuilt, with some new stone incorporated. The original roof had been replaced earlier this century with a bitumen one which was beginning to wear out. This was removed and replaced with a new slate roof, with new lead on the flat areas.

Traces could be seen of the weather vanes on the tower pinnacles, and by using old photographs and prints, five replicas were made and fixed into position. This work was all carried out with care and skill by our builders for the restoration, Messrs Norman Collison of Bicester.

The appearance was greatly improved by unblocking the upper windows, for which newly-made steel frames were inserted following the profiles of the openings. The windows in the tower and turrets were blocked with masonry as part of the original design, pierced only with small quatrefoil openings. To make the turret rooms lighter so that they could be used as bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen, it was necessary to open up the least visible of these. Some coloured glass survived in one bathroom window.

The central glass doors on two sides of the ground floor were also a new introduction to lighten the inside. Enough lead masks were salvaged from the outer faces of the two solid doors they replaced, to make up a complete set on the remaining door.

Inside, apart from introducing plumbing and electricity, the main task was the restoration of the painted ceiling under the dome. It was in poor condition, the paint decayed and flaking, but it was skilfully restored by Michael and Benjamin Gibbon in 1970.

It was thought, and later confirmed, that the stone walls were not originally painted, and the paint was therefore cleaned off, and only where the surface was plastered was new paint applied. The turret rooms were all completely redecorated, with the bedroom floors raised to bring them nearer the windows. The balustrade is original but repainted.

The Gothic Temple is one of the finest examples of the kind of building which the Landmark Trust was set up to help. It would be inconvenient to live in all the time, yet making it less so would require disfiguring alterations. On the other hand it is ideally suited to short term occupation, when all the excitement of its architectural form can be enjoyed, without the lasting prospect of the practical drawbacks.

Film fans might be interested to know that in 1999, the Gothic Temple had a cameo role in the James Bond film *The World is Not Enough* starring Pierce Brosnan. The Gothic Temple stands in for a church where a funeral has taken place and appears shortly after the opening action sequence. The building also appeared in the 2010 remake of *Wolfman*, starring Anthony Hopkins.

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