

The Landmark Trust

GURNEY MANOR, CANNINGTON, SOMERSET

THE HISTORY OF THE MANOR

Gurney Manor has been recognised for many years as a most remarkable survival: a little altered late medieval house of high quality, with almost all its original structure still intact. Although parts of the building date back to before 1400, the main period of building was between 1450 and 1480. Most alterations made afterwards, such as new windows or fireplaces, panelling or decorative plasterwork, date from the Tudor and Elizabethan periods. From 1600 until now no substantial change had occurred, beyond the rebuilding of the hall roof, first around 1690 and then in about 1890 - and again in the 1980s.

Gurney Manor is named after its earliest owners, the Gurneys. This family owned a lot of land in Somerset, including the part of Cannington which came to be called Gurney Street, where a house was built before 1350. Although little of it survives, the presence of that first open hall with chambers at one or both ends can still be felt in the hall range at the front of the building.

To this simple hall house, rebuilt itself around 1400 with a new cross-wing containing a solar at its western end, additions were made over the next few decades. The barn was built at the eastern end and the small building, possibly once a kitchen, was added on the north-west corner. Although the main line of the family died out before 1400, there were still Gurneys living in Cannington in the next century: in about 1430 Jane, the daughter and heiress of Hugh Gurney, married Roger Dodisham. From them, the manor passed to their son William, a lawyer. It was during his lifetime that the courtyard house we see today came into existence.

The Dodishams were a family of rising importance in the area, who had been steadily buying land since the 1380s. William clearly had money to spend: the work he did is all of the highest quality. The hall was given new windows, and a porch. At the south end of the west wing, a new solar block was added. This had a parlour and small chapel on the ground floor, and a solar on the first, with a fine arch-braced roof. At the same time, a new kitchen range was built, enclosing the south side of the courtyard. Across the yard between it and the hall ran a covered way, or pentice, to shelter the servants as they went to and fro. Above the kitchen were chambers, again with an arch-braced roof. These possibly formed a self-contained apartment, with their own garderobe.

Then, in 1480, William Dodisham left his manor of "Gourneystrete, in which he himself lived" to his niece Agnes, wife of Walter Michel. The Michels were another rising local dynasty, who already owned nine manors. Agnes herself came from another wealthy family, and more was soon done to the house, to bring it up to Tudor standards of comfort. Over the next fifty years, new windows and fireplaces were inserted, and a new floor in the hall, creating an upper storey within it.

Then, for a time, everything stopped, because in 1539 Thomas Michel, grandson of Agnes, murdered his wife and her sister and then killed himself. Disorder followed, at the end of which it emerged that the family of the murdered women had rushed in and stripped the house of its furniture, and the farm of its livestock. Since the Crown also thought it had a claim to these, the case was taken to the Court of Star Chamber, which is why we know about it.

The Michels owned Gurney Manor until 1616. Thomas's grandson, Sir Bartholomew, was the last to live there. He may have floored the solar, extending the stair at the same time, as well as forming a garderobe closet in the north-west wing, and possibly fitting some panelling. Little has been done since, beyond the re-roofings of the hall range, and new windows and floor surfaces here and there. The chapel was at one time used as a china closet, at another as a farm office, at whose window the men collected their wages.

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After Bartholomew's death the property went down in the world from manor to farmhouse: his daughter married a Hockmore of Buckland Brewer in Devon, who soon let it to tenants. This pattern continued through changes of owner, first to Gould then to the Earls of Cavan. The last farming tenants, the Bucknells, played a prominent part in Cannington life and later owned the property from 1925-34, after which the house was sold to a Miss Davison. Both she and the Society for the Protection for Ancient Buildings became concerned about its condition, and in 1938 the SPAB's Ancient Buildings Trust (ABT) bought the freehold for £500, a crucial intervention. The house was then leased to a developer, Mr C. Harris, who divided it into nine flats. By the late 1960s, the building was poorly maintained and of increasing concern, and the ABT being wound up. In 1971, the SPAB reluctantly sold the freehold to Mr Harris for just £170. The house limped on until 1984, when his heirs sold it to Landmark. By now most of the flats had fallen empty. Only those in the barn, forming the east wing, were still occupied by tenants.

In fact, the division into flats had scarcely affected the fabric, and without this use, it is possible that the building would have been lost in the 1940s. By 1980, however, the house was run down, and parts of it were near to collapse, with long-concealed structural problems starting to become obvious as walls and chimneys leaned perilously. The intention was to repair the entire building, and to reunite its historic core as a single dwelling.

Today, the manor has returned to something approaching its appearance in 1600. In 1984, it took the eye of faith, or of considerable knowledge, to see the interior of a medieval house behind the plaster ceilings and partitions that hid all but a few details from view. Now, fine medieval roofs and fireplaces are fully visible and wonderfully repaired. Windows have been reglazed in traditional patterns, walls have on them lime plaster as good as that of medieval craftsmen, and ceilings, whether of plaster or moulded oak, are in perfect shape.

In its new life, the original arrangement of the house has been respected, and the layout of the rooms for the most part follows the pattern set before 1500. In some cases, such as the parlour and the hall, and the chapel, they can be used again as they were in medieval times. But the needs of today have also been catered for. The kitchen has moved to a more convenient site for modern life, between the hall and the parlour. Bathrooms have been fitted in where they do not interrupt the medieval layout. Central heating has been installed, to supplement the heat of the open fires.

To oversee the work, the Landmark Trust employed Peter Bird of Caroe and Partners of Wells, an architect with wide experience of historic building conservation, alongside the equally experienced quantity surveyors, Bare, Leaning and Bare of Bath. Nearly all the work was carried out by the Landmark Trust's own small workforce. Under the careful and knowledgeable eye of the foreman, Philip Ford, our masons and joiners worked on nearly every corner of the building, to make it sound and weathertight.

After eight years work, this task was completed in time for Christmas 1992. Since then, Gurney Manor has been let for holidays for up to nine people. An income is thus generated for future maintenance, and at the same time this lovely house is enjoyed by as many people as possible.

THE RESTORATION OF GURNEY MANOR **by Peter Bird of Caroe & Partners, architects**

Building work began at Gurney Manor in the autumn of 1984, with the careful removal of modern accretions and plaster layers to attempt to learn more of the history of the house. It is a remarkable building, and was worth taking time over; and this archaeological exercise which occupied some nine months was indeed very rewarding. It enabled us to assemble a large fund of information about the building before any decisions were made about repair; and it was a most exciting period in that every day seemed to reveal more fascinating detail about the building's past.

Armed with this history of the house it was possible to develop a programme for its restoration stage by stage and to agree the work with English Heritage, who provided a generous grant for the work. Repair began in the solar block. The magnificent 15th-century roof here was badly decayed; the chimney stack was falling out, and window tracery was precarious and defaced. The roof was carefully dismantled, repaired and re-assembled. One carved post of the original roof was found to survive, and this was conserved and used as a model for the restoration of the remaining posts. The chimney was tied back to the building with a complicated web of concrete stitches; a print of 1845 enabled us to reproduce the early chimney head in stone. During this work the 13th-century carved-stone head of a King, now set in the wall of the solar, was found in the hearth of the same room.

Once the solar block was weathertight, work passed to the kitchen range. Here again the 15th-century roof was dismantled and repaired. The south wall, leaning outward because of the sideways load of the roof, was restrained again with a concrete ring beam concealed in the head of the wall: the ends of this beam were tied to the structure by drilling through the wall core, in order to avoid loss of medieval render and plaster which survives inside and out. The nuts and bolts securing the beam can be seen inside the flue of the fireplace.

As the work progressed on the outside "envelopes" of the kitchen and solar it was possible to turn to the interior, and to details such as the repair of the rendering. Where it was missing or loose, this has been replaced in lime mortar exactly to match the original. The stonework of the window tracery and dressings has been repaired by consolidation of the old work and by some replacement of the worst decayed material. Repair of timber floors such as the framed floor over the kitchen, all done with epoxy resin to save as much as possible of the old timber, has also been undertaken. The fine chapel ceiling, with its remains of bright medieval paint, was taken down for conservation, and to allow for the carving of new fretwork, to replace missing sections.

Next came the hall, where the roof has been restored to its 17th-century level, after taking off the late 19th-century roof and building a new structure at the lower level revealed by research. The roofs of the small building on the north-west corner, and the pentice in the courtyard, have also been repaired, and the pentice walls rebuilt.

For the last year, work was concentrated on finishing the interior, and fitting it out for its new occupants. Even so, there were new finds - during the work for the central heating, for example, the original open hearth in the hall was discovered. As work proceeded over the years more and more had been found out about the building: all this was recorded and our knowledge of Gurney Manor and its builders improved steadily as each stone was removed and replaced.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Gurney Manor sleeps up to 9 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.