

The Landmark Trust

HOUGHTON WEST LODGE, HOUGHTON, NORFOLK

The West Lodge is one of four lodges that guard the approaches to Houghton Hall, the splendid rural palace that belonged to Sir Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister. The Walpole family held land here at least from the 13th century and, through inheritance and marriage, greatly extended the size of the Houghton estate until by the beginning of the 18th century it had reached some 16,000 acres. Sir Robert Walpole inherited the estate in 1700, and by this time the old medieval house was in a poor state. Jonas Wolfe, writing to Sir Robert in 1721 graphically illustrates why a new house was necessary - "I am writing this in your Honour's study, where I have a thousand ungrateful Companions, the Mice who doe dayly dispoyle to youre papers, parchments & Bookes ...They run in such numbers 'tis impossible to think of destroying them unless the whole be removed; in the meantime what are yett untouched by them are very unsecure".

Sir Robert also needed a house to match his political ambitions and to demonstrate his power, wealth and discrimination. Designs were drawn up by Colen Campbell and modified by Thomas Ripley, chief carpenter at the Office of Works. William Kent designed the interiors, which housed a fine collection of paintings. The resultant house was the most sumptuous of its day. Significant improvements were also made to the gardens and grounds. The entrance to the Park was then between a pair of lodges opposite the New Inn. The church, dedicated to St. Martin remained in the park, and it is here that Sir Robert and Horace Walpole lie buried.

In fact, the demands of political life and the need to be at the centre of power meant that Sir Robert only spent a month a year at Houghton Hall - but when there he entertained in style. The greater part of the government would go down to Norfolk during the summer and Christmas recesses to spend a week or more "plotting politics in the interval of hunting, feasting and boozing with the local gentry". These exclusively masculine gatherings were known as the Houghton "congresses" and underpinned the web of influence and patronage upon which the Whig party was based.

Yet for all this political power, the male line failed in 1797 and the Houghton estate passed to the Cholmondeley family of Cheshire. They decided to use Houghton as principle residence until their own new house was built. Lord Cholmondeley was evidently fond of the gates at Cholmondeley Hall for he had them transferred to Houghton with a new pair of lodges built to accommodate them. These were described by a surveyor in 1798 as 'the meanest looking Hovels of the kind I ever saw'. The second Marquis Cholmondeley "much extended the plantations on the estate, and planted ...a very fine oak avenue, leading to the West Lodge". In 1840, building accounts show they had been replaced by those we see today.

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The repair of Houghton West Lodge

When The Landmark Trust acquired the West Lodge in 1990 it had not been lived in for many years and the ceilings in most of the rooms had collapsed. The estate had no further need for it and so leased it to Landmark.

The west lodge is small single storey building a little over 20 feet square, built of brick on a stone plinth. It has a central brick chimney stack serving the sitting room fireplace and the kitchen range. There are only two other rooms, originally both bedrooms. The roof is of Welsh slate. Small sections of cornice return horizontally to create the impression of a broken pediment to each facade. The sitting room and main bedroom each have an elegant round arched window fitted with sashes. In contrast the kitchen, which faces onto a small yard, has metal casement windows. The front door is framed with a horizontal hood and trellis across the head and down each side. At the other side of the yard is a combined bakehouse and wash house roofed with pantiles rather than slates. A separate door led into the wood/coal shed and backing on to this from the opposite side was the privy.

The first works to be undertaken were structural. The walls of both the lodge and the wash house were in poor condition and leaning inwards. The east wall of the yard was taken down and rebuilt. All four gables had to be rebuilt down to some extent, and part of the south wall of the wash-house was taken down and rebuilt. The roofs on both buildings were also replaced - the lodge in slate and the wash-house with pantiles, in both cases reusing any sound originals. The chimney stack also had to be taken down to below roof level and rebuilt with new flue liners fitted. A lean-to woodshed and a 1920's extension in the courtyard were demolished.

All the windows and doors were repaired wherever possible or replaced with matching ones. The bedroom window, which had been blocked, was reopened and the sashes replaced. Softwood flooring was replaced with the same in the bedroom and tiles laid in the sitting room and kitchen. The tiny fireplace in the bedroom, previously plastered over, was discovered during the works. All the rooms were given new plaster ceilings and all walls were painted in lime paint. A new bathroom was created where the second bedroom had been. The top section of the adjacent estate wall was removed and the coping put back at a lower level. Where the extension met the wall, a new window was inserted to light the bathroom, with a casement to match the kitchen windows. The courtyard was laid with brick paviours.

Mains electricity and a new water supply had to be run from the nearest estate buildings nearly a mile away - a disconcertingly expensive undertaking. A new septic tank was also installed. The lodge walls were re-rendered after a careful analysis of the original lime based render, then lined out to imitate ashlar stone as had originally been the case. They were limewashed in white to match the other estate lodges. The brickwork of the yard and the wash house had not been rendered originally and so this was just re-limewashed without rendering it. New sections of the estate park railings were made and new timber gates constructed, based on those at the North lodge. Thus the scene was re-set, and the western approach to Houghton Hall once more benignly guarded.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Houghton West Lodge sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.