

The Landmark Trust

KEEPER'S COTTAGE, OLD WARDEN, BEDFORDSHIRE

Keeper's Cottage is a model gamekeeper's establishment of the late nineteenth century. Cottage, outbuildings and kennels together form a handsome example of Victorian estate architecture, based on the pattern books published to help architects, builders and clients design ideal dwellings for people from all levels of society. The fashion for such dwellings (and there are many in Old Warden village) was driven partly by benevolent landowners' desire to improve the living conditions of their estate workers and partly by the same landowners' wish to create a picturesque landscape in which to exist and to show off to their friends.

Old Warden Park (today's Shuttleworth Estate), in which Keeper's Cottage stands, once formed part of the lands owned by Warden Abbey, to the east of today's Old Warden. Today, what remains of the monastery was also restored, and is let for holidays, by the Landmark Trust. After the Dissolution of the abbey in 1537 by Henry VIII, the Old Warden manor passed into at first into royal hands. Eventually, in the 1690s, various portions of land were consolidated into a single estate by a rich linen draper called Samuel Ongley. A bachelor, Ongley made his fortune through involvement with the East India Company and (in its early days) the South Sea Company. By buying the estate at Old Warden, on which then stood an old brick manor house, Ongley was seeking to gentrify himself and found a dynasty. In 1712, he was knighted by Queen Anne and it was probably Ongley who built Queen Anne's Summerhouse, the foursquare folly that stands at the top of the warren above Keeper's Cottage, also restored as a Landmark. In the late 18th century, Robert Henley, inheriting through his mother, became Baron Ongley of Old Warden. It was his grandson, the 3rd Lord Ongley, who created the picturesque Swiss Garden on the estate (now restored) and began to build the model village at Old Warden in the 1830s. However, by the 1870s the family's wealth was failing and in 1872, the 3rd Lord Ongley sold up to another self-made man, Joseph Shuttleworth.

Joseph Shuttleworth was the son of a Lincolnshire shipwright, who had spotted the potential of steam. With Nathaniel Clayton, in 1842 he formed The Clayton & Shuttleworth Co., an iron foundry and engineering business that made portable steam engines and traction engines. By 1872, when Joseph Shuttleworth came to Old Warden, the firm had branches throughout Europe and exported their engines all over the world. Shuttleworth employed architect Henry Clutton to demolish the old brick mansion and build him new one.

Shuttleworth took as his model Gawthorpe Hall in Lancashire, an early Jacobean seat of Shuttleworth namesakes but not, it seems, necessarily ancestors. Clutton transformed its design into the 'Jacobethan' mansion that still stands today. Joseph Shuttleworth also turned his attention to improving the dwellings of the tenants on his estate, inspired no doubt by the patterns books that were published to provide exemplars of themed designs and floorplans. At Old Warden, these later dwellings can be distinguished from the more whimsical cottages of the 1830s by their inclusion of mass manufactured elements – diamond paned metal windows, fish scale roof tiles, bargeboards, and terracotta date plaques with the mailed fist clenching a weaver's shuttle that the Shuttleworths adopted as their crest.

Working with Henry Clutton on Shuttleworth Hall was a local architect-builder called John Usher. Estate accounts show that it was Usher, rather than Clutton, who designed and built Keeper's Cottage in 1877-8, and no doubt others of the 1870s model cottages in the village. Usher's plans for the cottage and its outbuildings are now at the Bedford Record Office, and it is an eclectic sampler of factory-produced architectural elements and well-crafted features like its tall cluster of chimneys of moulded bricks.

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The first residents of Keeper's Cottage were gamekeeper Richard Aireton and his family. A report in a local newspaper by the county medical officer in the summer of 1876 reveal that the Airetons previously lived in Queen Anne's Summerhouse, where the medical officer found two little girls seriously ill with scarlet fever. They died within a fortnight of each other; there could be no more poignant illustration of the need for more sanitary living conditions.

The gamekeeper was a crucial member of the estate team, for both Joseph Shuttleworth and even more his son Colonel Frank Shuttleworth (who inherited the estate in 1883) loved to shoot, and Old Warden became renowned for its pheasant and partridge shooting. These would have been masterminded from Keeper's Cottage, with its sitting house and detached kennels. These were golden Edwardian days, when the game books record prodigious bags.

Late in life, Frank Shuttleworth married the local vicar's daughter, Dorothy, who was 24 years his junior. They had just one son, Richard, who showed a passion for cars and the new-fangled airplanes from an early age. Sadly in 1940, Richard Shuttleworth, died in a flying accident, training for wartime service. His grieving mother Dorothy decided to make the estate over to an educational trust in his memory, and the mansion became a college for countryside-based studies. Keeper's Cottage fell into disuse, its repair beyond the resources of a trust devoted to other aims, and so in 2001 the estate approached the Landmark Trust to take on both Keeper's Cottage and Queen Anne's Summerhouse, offering a generous donation towards the restoration costs. The cottage's outbuildings had mostly fallen down, the roof of the cottage had holes in it, its windows were boarded up and floorboards were rotten and dangerous. The roof of the detached kennel block had collapsed. None of the buildings had water or electricity.

Repair of Keeper's Cottage

The cottage was repaired according to the evidence found, using traditional crafts and techniques. The roof had to be almost completely rebuilt. Many of the roof tiles were salvaged and re-used for the outbuildings, but there were not enough for the cottage roof so new ones had to be sourced. Lime was used for the repointing and repair of the brickwork, coloured by crushed charcoal like the original. Some of the external stonework, plasterwork and timber framing had to be replaced. The metal window frames almost all survived but had to be reglazed and repainted – laborious tasks. Much of the internal woodwork had to be replaced and a partition wall was taken down to make room to install a modern kitchen. Upstairs, the smallest of the original bedrooms was made into a bathroom.

At first, we did not plan to reinstate the outbuildings (coal house, washhouse, WC and sitting house, where the pheasant chicks were hatched) but then the discovery that John Usher's plans survived allowed their recreation without speculation. The later, detached kennel block was also repaired, complete with cauldron for boiling up the bones and mash for the dogs' feed – another of the Head Keeper's responsibilities. This recreation of a model gamekeeper's establishment provides a fascinating glimpse into another, earlier world of Edwardian shoots, the sport made possible only by the skill and dedication of keepers like those who lived here.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Keeper's Cottage sleeps up to 4 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk.