

# The Landmark Trust

## KNOWLE HILL, NR. TICKNALL, DERBYSHIRE

Like many properties rescued by the Landmark Trust, Knowle Hill is a fragment, an intriguing memory of something once larger and finer. The fragment here is not just of a building, but also of a most interesting garden. Historical and archaeological research show that in the two converging valleys which make up Knowle Hill we have the remains of a garden created around 1700, which has undergone little structural alteration since 1770.

In 1686, Walter Burdett, a younger son of the neighbouring estate of Foremark, rented 45 acres of land called Knowle Hills from the Cokes of Melbourne. Burdett was a barrister practising in London who retired to the country after his father's death in 1696. In 1701, he moved into a new house he had built for himself at Knowle Hill, on the western side of a little valley. Round his house, Walter formed a garden. Its character was Italian, an unusual choice for that period. The natural landscape was allowed to blend evocatively with the more formal layout of terraces and pools, to conjure up an Elysian world in miniature. Walter emerges from letters as a likeable and sociable person, entertaining a constant stream of visitors. Among them were Thomas Coke of Melbourne, whose guardian he had been, along with his own family, and neighbours such as the Curzons, the Harpurs of Calke and Lord Chesterfield from Bretby.

On his death in 1732, Walter Burdett left Knowle Hill to his niece, Jane Hopegood. She sold it soon after to a young man named Nicholas Hardinge, who had local connections but worked in London, where he was Clerk to the House of Commons. Until his death in 1758 he used Knowle Hill as a retreat, and wrote long poems praising its idyllic qualities. Then, in 1766, Knowle Hill was bought by Walter's great-nephew, Sir Robert Burdett of Foremark. From 1759-63, he had rented it from Mrs Hardinge and lived there with his family while Foremark was rebuilt. Now, however, he demolished the house. In its place, possibly over some former stables, he built a custodian's cottage, and a Gothick summerhouse, which soared like a ruined castle on the valley's edge. Walter's house, which rose up the slope from the valley floor, and apparently resembled an Italianate structure of terraces and steps, with a mysterious rock-cut chamber in its midst, was left as an intriguing classical ruin. Knowle Hill was now a pleasure garden, to be visited for picnics and other light-hearted excursions. In the 19th century it became a popular resort for people from nearby towns. The sense of mystery and decay was strong, but attractively so.

When Knowle Hill was first suggested to the Landmark Trust in 1987, decay had gone nearly to the limits of destruction, to the concern of many local people. The two wooded valleys had been leased to the Forestry Commission about 1950. The surrounding land was later sold to a neighbouring farmer, along with two pools in the valleys.

Finally, in 1982, the buildings, which had scarcely been lived in since 1958, were sold to a private owner but remained for the most part empty, growing ever more ruinous. Knowle Hill was not forgotten, however. Alerted by local conservationists, Landmark began negotiations to reunite the property. Buildings and pools were acquired in 1989 and the woods followed in 1993, when the felling of conifers suddenly allowed the central area of the garden to be appreciated as a whole for the first time. By then, repairs to the buildings were well underway and at Easter 1994, the first visitors arrived to stay in this most secluded place.

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## KNOWLE HILL: THE BUILDINGS & THEIR REPAIR

The brick buildings around the walled courtyard were mainly built by Sir Robert Burdett in 1769, but contain fragments of Walter Burdett's earlier buildings. The lower range on the east has been much reduced in size, firstly around 1900 and again in 1992-4, by Landmark. The two-storeyed west range may have started as a single storey building, open-fronted, perhaps a stable of about 1700. The spaces between the timber posts were filled in with brick when the cottage was added above in 1769.

When Landmark took on Knowle Hill all the buildings were ruinous and the summerhouse range was falling into the valley. Some hard decisions had to be taken, since the cost of repairing everything would have been huge. Farm buildings on the north side of the courtyard were no longer needed so these were clear candidates for demolition, leaving just one gable. The northern rooms of the summerhouse were even sadder to part with. They had Gothick windows and contributed to the picturesque outline of the building. However, if Knowle Hill was to survive at all, and be repaired at a reasonable cost, these too had to go. Even so, complicated structural engineering was needed to hold the outer wall securely in place.

The cottage now contains most of the Landmark accommodation for five people. Water and electricity had to be brought in, and kitchen and bathroom provided. The repairs were carried out in as careful and conservative a way as possible, to preserve the character of the rooms, with their small fireplaces and casement windows. The glass in these windows is new. On the east is what remains of Sir Robert's summerhouse. Until about 1900, when it was re-roofed, this range was considerably taller, rising in the centre to a tower. This and a crenellated parapet gave the summerhouse its dramatic profile from below. A photograph of c.1880 enabled the parapet and part of the tower to be reinstated in 1994.

Inside the summerhouse, stone steps lead down to two rooms on a terrace cut out of the side of the hill. Their outer walls are stone and they are lit by windows which have been altered to give them Gothick heads. North of these rooms is an open terrace, with shallow niches in its inner retaining wall. This terrace belongs to the 1700 garden layout. The rooms at its end may be the remains of a gazebo inside which a flight of steps led up to the main terrace. The main room of the summerhouse is the garden room, now the sitting room for the Landmark, called Pemik's Room after the benefactor who enabled its repair. Although derelict, enough detail survived of joinery and plasterwork to allow the new work to be copied from it. The extent to which the range has subsided can be seen by comparing the levels of the dado rail either side of the garden door. The window in the outer wall is new, but the colour on the walls is copied from traces of the old paint.

The restoration was carried out under the supervision of Rodney Melville and Partners of Leamington Spa, with the work being done by the Derbyshire building firm, Edward Wood & Son. The foreman was Bill Hickinbottom.

The repair of the garden and its surviving structures remains an ongoing project when funds permit.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Knowle Hill sleeps up to 5 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*

## KNOWLE HILL: A TOUR OF THE GARDEN

The two valleys now owned by Landmark formed the heart of Walter Burdett's garden. The planned landscape was once larger, however, running from the wood to the south called Gorsey Ley, round the western skyline to Seven Spouts (embracing the Knoll which gives the place its name). An exploration of this perimeter is well worthwhile, particularly the embankment forming one edge of a great canal and duck decoy on the edge of Gorsey Ley, but for present purposes, only the main circular walk at the centre will be described.

Walter's guests would have arrived by carriage up a gently graded drive which leaves Warswick Lane where the two valleys meet. When Knowle Hill became a detached pleasure garden for Foremark Hall, the approach seems to have been changed to the one used now, from Seven Spouts, to which a ride led from Foremark.

Whether before 1770 or after, you are soon drawn to the south, to the lawn onto which Sir Robert's pretty garden room opens. This broad main terrace is supported by a substantial wall, and from it, the best views of the Trent valley could once be enjoyed. At its southern end, there may have been a small grotto in an alcove where the ground rises to close the view, with steps leading up to a bower of pleached limes and a seat. To the left of the alcove, however, the visitor could glimpse, in the distance, a flash of white water on a cascade at the head of the valley. From this water tumbled down a rill between grassy banks to the valley floor.

Drawn towards the cascade, you find yourself on a walk up the valley, going past the alcove with the ground falling away on the left. On the right the ground rises to an upper terrace. This is nearly as broad as the main terrace, with a stone wall on its outside and lines of trees on both inner and outer edges. It was until recently known as the Pleasure Ground, and formed an alternative place to stroll and enjoy the view. Continuing along the narrow main walk, above the rill, you are soon beside the cascade, at the edge of a rectangular pool. From the higher ground on the right, early visitors would have glimpsed a little building at the far end, in the opposite corner. To reach it, they followed the walk along the western side of the pool, enjoying the still water fringed by alders. At the far end, a raised platform allows a view in reverse, back down the valley towards the house. The little building seen before stood over the stream which enters the pool at its south-east corner. Possibly a pavilion, for shelter, it may also have contained apparatus for holding back water, allowing it to be released on special occasions to make a good show on the cascade.

A bridge over the stream tempted visitors across it, and the agile can still follow the same route, to walk down the eastern side of the pool enjoying a new set of views down the valley. This walk ends in a promontory level with the lawn, giving a fine prospect of the buildings on the opposite bank. There may once have been steps down the bank, beside what seems to have been a wall spanning the valley at this point, but now, undergrowth permitting, you have to slither to the valley floor, before walking northwards along it. From here you can enjoy to the full the dramatic effect of the Gothick summerhouse. Beyond and below it is the Italianate terrace which was, it seems, part of Walter's house. The tumble of brick and stone in front formed service rooms, from which steps led up to where a tunnel runs into the hill. For special guests, candles were placed in the niches at the sides of this tunnel, and in the circular chamber at its end. Here a rock-cut seat allows you to pause and enjoy the excitement of all underground places, and the meditations they give rise to.

Refreshed by this interlude, you may continue down the valley, choosing to walk along the bottom, or at a slightly higher level on a terrace possibly once edged with yews. As you near the end of the walk, the sound of water is heard again. You soon find yourself on a small embankment, below which the water once tumbled over another cascade, before flowing on towards the Trent.

Here again you have a choice. You can return to the house up Walter's carriage drive or, attracted perhaps by a louder sound of water from the adjoining Seven Spouts valley, you can turn your back on the Trent. Here you must imagine a walk cut through the wood, running uphill in a south-westerly direction. After a few minutes, a waterfall is glimpsed between the trees, and before long you are standing beside a ruined basin, into which a shute of water falls. Admiration having duly been expressed, you are naturally drawn to see what lies above. Once, you could make your way up the bank by steps, by now you must scramble, to find yourself by another rectangular sheet of water fringed by trees. In the corner to your left stands a fine beech tree, the direct successor of one admired by visitors in the eighteenth century.

Beyond it, you may then have noticed, with relief, another bower or pavilion, placed on a buttressed platform projecting into the south-east corner of the pool. Wearied by the walk uphill, you could gratefully rest for a few moments, your need anticipated by the gardener's art. The energetic might then feel tempted to walk up to the top of the knoll, site of a supposed ancient burial mound. From there, the Trent valley spreads into the eastern distance while behind, your eye can follow the line of trees planted on the western horizon to define the limits of Walter Burdett's small Arcadia, to the heart of which you can now return.