

# The Landmark Trust

## LANGLEY GATEHOUSE, NR. ACTON BURNELL, SHROPSHIRE

Langley Gatehouse now overlooks a farmyard on one side and a meadow on the other. It was built, however, to protect the entrance to Langley Hall, a rambling house of varied date which was demolished in the 1870s. At the same time, a new farmhouse was built outside the once walled and moated enclosure. The origins of Langley Hall were medieval, as its defences show. These are visible as earthworks south and east of the site, which are possible remnants of a moat; and in the gatehouse itself. The lower part of its west wall, and the gate arch, belong to a curtain wall of about 1300, which runs on a short way north.

Langley at that time belonged to the Burnells, after whom the neighbouring village and castle of Acton Burnell are named. By 1400, however, Langley had passed by marriage to the Lees, whose main seat it became. In 1591, it was inherited by Humphrey Lee, who besides being Sheriff of Shropshire in 1600 was made a baronet by James I in 1620. He enlarged the Hall and the chapel, and it is now clear that he did the same for the gatehouse, in about 1610.

Some doubts have been raised in the last few years as to whether the gatehouse was built in several phases, with front and back being of different periods, and whether its northern third was also a later addition. While building work was in progress in 1992, however, the Hereford Archaeology Unit made a detailed survey of the gatehouse, and dendro-dating was done on samples from several of the main timbers. These confirmed that the whole upper part of the building, front and back, with the section north of the gate arch, were all built at one time.

On top of an earlier, possibly single-storied building, Sir Humphrey added what amounts to a small house, a late flourish in a tradition of grand pseudo-defensive entrances that began in the late Middle Ages. Inside the gatehouse, the rooms on the first floor were of good quality, warmed by fires, so they were almost certainly for living in, either by an officer of the household such as the steward, or by important guests.

Sir Humphrey's son, Sir Richard, had no son, so on his death Langley was inherited by one of his daughters who was married to Edward Smythe. The Smythes lived at Langley for a time, but by 1700 had moved to Acton Burnell. Langley Hall itself became a farmhouse, and was eventually pulled down. The gatehouse was used for storage, and perhaps as a dormitory for farm servants.

In this state it survived into this century, occasionally repaired and altered in small ways to suit some new need, but slowly growing ever more derelict. From this state it was rescued in 1978 by the Department of the Environment, which proposed to take the gatehouse into guardianship, and erected scaffolding around it. Before more than minor repairs had been carried out, however, work stopped due to a change in government policy on guardianship monuments. The Department's successor, English Heritage, was still keen to secure the future of the gatehouse, but how to do this was unclear.

Then, in 1986, English Heritage approached the Landmark Trust with a proposal for a joint scheme to repair the building and provide it with a new use. After lengthy negotiations between all the parties concerned, including the Langley estate, Treasure & Son started work in January 1992, under the supervision of the architect Andrew Thomas. The gatehouse was furnished in July 1993, and has been let for holidays ever since.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW  
*Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205*

*Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*

## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

When building work started in 1992, the scaffolding which had been put up in the 1970s was itself something of an ancient monument, and was highly unsafe. The first job was therefore to dismantle this, and replace it with something more substantial. Props had already been inserted to hold up the plaster ceiling in the central parlour, but further props were now added to hold up the northern end where it had been weakened by the removal of part of the ground floor front wall. This was all the more urgent when it was discovered that the whole north east corner was supported by an ancient wine bottle wedged beneath the worn out foot of the corner post.

The load on the walls was greatly reduced when the stone slates were stripped off the roof. These slates are one of the best features of Langley, and come from Harnage, near Shrewsbury, a sandstone with a lot of fossil material. The quarry closed long ago, but fortunately Treasures had a supply of second hand ones to make up for those that were broken or missing. Once the slates had been stripped the roof structure itself was patched and repaired, before the slates were refixed. They are graded by size with the largest at the bottom, and round the gables they form "swept" valleys, curving round the angle without a break. There are no gutters, the deep eaves shedding water away from the walls beneath.

Meanwhile much activity had been going on below. The west front was repointed, with a new mortar of lime and sand, to match the old. A moment of drama was provided when part of the medieval wall collapsed, leaving a hole the size of a man. The west windows, which had been bricked up since the eighteenth century, were unblocked and reglazed. Finally the great oak doors were fitted, based on those that can be seen in old watercolours.

The repair of the east front had its exciting moments too. The plan was for the whole structure to function properly again, but before this could happen, the sagging framework had to be brought back to its true level. Only then would each post and rail and brace work together in mutual support. The frame at the north end had sunk by about 10 inches, and had to be carefully jacked up again, a slow and nerve-wracking business - calmly masterminded by the foreman Mervyn Higgins. Before work started, detailed drawings of the frame had been made, giving each timber a number, to match a list of repairs for each. Some needed new ends, some a piece in the middle, others were missing completely. Seasoned oak was used for small repairs, but where a major timber had to be renewed, green oak was used, as it would have been originally.

Where possible, the frame was repaired without dismantling it. In this case, the infill panels, whether early lath and plaster or later brick, were simply repaired. Where there was no infill, or brick had to come out to allow repair of the surrounding frame, it was replaced in new lath and plaster. The building thus retains the evidence of its chequered past.

A new window was inserted to light the parlour over the gate passage. There had been a window here originally, but this whole section was later rebuilt. New windows were also inserted in the south end, to light the kitchen and bathroom above. Inside, a new stair has been inserted, cleverly designed to fit the rather narrow space available to it. It seems that the original builders gave themselves more room by allowing the partition to the first floor bedroom to divide the west window in two, but we felt it was better undivided.

The parlour was originally panelled, and now is again; and its plaster cornice has been repaired. The floors, where they existed, have also been repaired. In the kitchen and the attics, however, they were missing entirely, and here new boards have been fitted. The rooms have all been furnished and decorated in a plain and simple manner, for the important guests who now occupy them.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Langley Gatehouse sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*