

# The Landmark Trust

## THE LIBRARY AND THE ORANGERY, NR. GREAT TORRINGTON, DEVON

Stevenstone was, from the 16th until the 19th century, the principal seat of the Rolle family, once the largest landowners in Devon. The great house that you now see, lying in ivy-clad ruins, was the third to be built on the site. It is to the second of these, a late 17th- or early 18th-century remodelling of a Tudor brick house, that the Library and Orangery relate - part of a formal garden layout that was later swept away. We know no definite dates for any of the work, either for the main house or the two pavilions, nor the names of architects or craftsmen concerned. They may have been commissioned in the 1680s by Sir John Rolle, who inherited in 1647 and was knighted at the Restoration, or perhaps by his grandson and heir Robert soon after he inherited in 1706. Both were architectural patrons - Robert was responsible for the colonnaded Queen Anne's Walk in Barnstaple - and whichever undertook the task probably employed some gifted local mason/architect, who may well have been familiar with the work of Talman and perhaps Wren. Architectural details seem to indicate the earlier date, but it would still have been possible to find craftsmen to do work in the "old-fashioned" manner 20 or 30 years later. Curiously, however, the armorial shields on the façade of the Library are not those of Sir John, nor of Robert nor either of their wives, but those of Robert's brother John and his wife Isabella. It may have been this John Rolle who finished work on the Library, decorated the interior and at the same time built the Orangery.

So had the Library always been used as a library? Probably not: to begin with, the existence of a library as a separate room was not common before the age of the Grand Tour and Palladianism, say from 1720 onwards. But during the restoration it appeared that there had never been a cornice in the upper room, indicating that the walls had always been lined with bookcases, or at least had been so from the time that the interior plaster-work was done. Certainly by 1796 the Library contents appeared in property lists separately from those of the main house. By 1976 the bookcases had all disappeared except for a few fragments of inlaid veneer, and these looked like 18th-century work. So Denys Rolle, third and youngest son of Robert Rolle's brother John, may have been responsible for fitting the building out as a library. Denys inherited in 1779 as the third and youngest son of Robert Rolle's brother John, He was an eccentric man, a naturalist who talked to the woodland animals and was a widely-read educationalist. He twice tried to establish a Utopian colony of Devon poor and homeless on 20,000 acres of land in East Florida and liked to work alongside them. When his settlers all deserted or returned home the second time, Rolles turned instead to enslaved Africans for labour on his plantations, building up a large workforce. After Florida was ceded to Spain in 1783, Rolles was given plantations in Exuma, Bahamas in compensation but returned himself to Devon, perhaps finding solace in his library. The Rolles slaves were officially liberated in 1838 a generation later, the compensation from the British government adding further to the Rolle family wealth. Many of the former slaves adopted the surname of Rolle. They took over the Rolle lands on Exuma as their own, running them communally. The lands are owned to this day by descendants of the former slaves, and cannot be sold.

Denys's son John died childless, and the estate passed to his nephew Mark, who took the name of Rolle and rebuilt Stevenstone in 1868-70. The Library was partly rebuilt at the same time: the roof was renewed, the front was rendered, and steps were built at the back to give access to the upper room. The Orangery was reroofed too, in glass, and became a fernery, and a new garden was laid out around them.

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In 1907 Mark Rolle also died without sons. In the years that followed the land was sold and most of the great house pulled down, with the remains being occupied by troops during the War. After the War the house was broken up and the lead from the roof sold for scrap, the stables were turned into cottages, and more cottages were built. In the late 1940s the Library itself was converted into a house, dividing the upper room and closing in the loggia, and the fireplace from the dining room in the main house was put in a ground-floor sitting room. In 1978, with the Orangery, it was put up for sale, and the two buildings were bought by the Landmark Trust, as a charity that specialises in the restoration of buildings of architectural or historic importance.

## **RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST**

Work on the Orangery began in late 1979, under the direction of the architect Philip Jebb, who had worked on many Landmark restorations. The builders were a local firm, R Gist & Son, with help from Stansells of Taunton. First the front wall had to be shored up, and the glass roof and the collapsing eaves cornice removed. It was decided not to put back the 19th-century iron roof but to reconstruct the slate roof that would have been there originally. A new cornice was made, reusing as many of the existing modillion blocks as possible. The chimney was rebuilt, in stone instead of in brick.

The top of the front wall was collapsing, and was taken down completely as far as the window heads. The brick piers between the windows, which were leaning badly outwards, were eased back to the vertical. A concrete ring beam was then formed to hold the shell in position, after which the top of the wall could be rebuilt and the whole wall repointed. The window frames had to be replaced, but the special draught-excluding sashes were repaired and reused. A new door was made, a copy of the original, and new shutters were made for the windows. Finally the interior was finished as simply as possible, with plain plaster walls topped by a new cornice, and a slate slab floor that came from the ground floor of the Library.

In 1980 work began on the Library. The Victorian roof was dismantled and a temporary protective covering put over the building. The shell of the building was far from sound - when the render was removed, many of the bricks could simply be removed by hand, and the outer brick face had not been properly tied into the inner skin. Much had to be completely rebuilt, and in other places damaged or decayed bricks were cut out and new ones stitched in. The whole front was then repointed. Defective stonework was repaired where possible, or renewed using Bath stone from the Corsham quarry. The steps at the back of the building were replaced with new ones in wood, and the second of the two windows in the north wall was made into a door, to match the other one, which had been altered when the steps were built. The roof was reconstructed to its original form, with a flat top, using mainly new timber but reusing as many of the existing slates as possible. But the glory of the new roof is the cornice. When the Victorian roof was stripped off, a few of the original modillions were found, cut back but still in good condition; much more ornate than the 19th-century ones, they had clearly belonged to a more elaborate cornice altogether. So a splendid new cornice was designed, incorporating copies of these, and was beautifully made by Richard Barnett, a local carpenter and wood carver. Inside, the ground-floor arches were reopened and a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen fitted behind a new wall. Upstairs, no attempt was made to restore the main room to its original form as a library, since the details of its appearance remain unknown. It was simply restored as a fine room of early 18th-century character, with a new cornice, dado rail and window architraves. A spiral stair was built, its top forming an island bookcase, and a grand fireplace surround from the contemporary dining room in the main house, put into ground floor of the Library some 40 or 50 years before, was moved upstairs to replace the plainer original, which has been used in the Orangery, still in use today as an unheated summer bedroom.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Library sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*