

The Landmark Trust

NEW INN: PEASENHALL, SUFFOLK

Peasehall has always been a quiet village, tucked away on a Suffolk byroad. In the Middle Ages, a mighty abbey stood nearby and the building we still know as New Inn overlooked a more significant crossroads. In the nineteenth century, the village became an example of 'rural industrialisation,' dominated by Smyths seed drill manufactory. Both abbey and drillworks have long since disappeared, but New Inn has survived them both.

Evidence of New Inn first appears 1463, when Thomas, Abbot of Sibton Abbey, leased to John Kempe and his wife Alice a 'messenger called Newynne with two adjacent pightles' (pieces of land) for 6s 8d a year. From this it is clear that there was already a building overlooking the triangle of land now known as the Knoll, and the 'Newynne' may well have been called such to distinguish it from an earlier one on the site. As late as 1840, the land in front was simply a widening of the main road (The Street), like a village square. Inns (to be distinguished from ale houses) were becoming more common by the mid-15th century, as booming trade and a growing population increased the demand for overnight accommodation. Indeed, the monasteries and religious guilds were the biggest providers of such hostelries, often a source of pride to their village.

At first glance, New Inn differed little from the house of, say, a well-to-do merchant. Medieval houses all followed a similar pattern: a central open, communal hall with a central hearth, from which led at one end rooms on two floors for the family (the high end), and at the other, service rooms: the pantry for dry goods and the buttery for wet (the low end). New Inn differs from these standard arrangements in two ways. Firstly, the accommodation at the High End is larger than usual, forming a wing extending into the courtyard at the back. This was to provide rooms both for the innkeeper's family, and for the guests, who would have had the use of the fine solar on the first floor. Secondly, New Inn has a large cellar under the low end, for the brewing and storing the ale. This cellar may well pre-date the main structure.

In New Inn, as in all medieval houses, the heart was the open hall, with its elaborate display of carpentry and carving in the open roof and large windows. Here the guests would gather to drink and eat, and warm themselves at the central hearth. The food was prepared for them in a separate kitchen, across the rear courtyard. Round this courtyard were also the stables for travellers' horses and mules, as well as barns and haylofts. In its centre was the well.

It is hard to say how long New Inn operated as a hostelry. The rights passed through the Kempe family but when Sibton Abbey was dissolved in 1536, ownership of 'the Newyn' along with Farthing pightle (a small field) is granted to five individuals. In 1623, Robert and Raph Bateman divided the property between them, placing the hall and high end in separate occupation from the rest of the site, and leaving us a detailed description of its facilities. There was still a kitchen, brewhouse, bakehouse barn and stable, although no specific mention of ongoing use as an inn other than the name itself, which persists until at least 1733. New Inn became tenements and workshops, and slipped usefully and seamlessly into village life, joined by the later cottages added on either side.

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Many alterations were made to the New Inn over the centuries. In the 16th or 17th century, a floor was inserted into the great open space of the hall and brick chimney flues were built in the hall and Low End. New plastered ceilings covered the timbers of open roofspaces. The building became multi-occupancy, and cottages were added at both southern and northern ends. Such ongoing alteration and division gradually disguised the medieval character of the building.

During WW2 the Knoll Cottages, as New Inn had come to be called, welcomed children evacuated from London. By 1958, however, the cottages had become so dilapidated that they were condemned as unfit for human habitation by Blyth Rural District Council, and threatened with demolition. Luckily, some memory of their medieval character lingered on, architect Robert Symonds, who lived in the Ancient House in Peasenhall, campaigned to save the range and encouraged the RDC to find out more about the cottages before they met their fate. What they discovered resulted in the transfer of ownership of New Inn to the Landmark Trust in 1971, and we restored it 1971-2.

The 1970s restoration was a bold one, in that it sought to return the hall to its original late 15th-century form by removing the later inserted ceiling and chimney stack. This allowed the fabulous medieval roof structure to be revealed, complete with crown post. The quality of the post's carving, and of other examples of joinery around the building, show that it was built with some pretension to grandeur. The bricks from the chimney were used to insert a brick panel at the high end of the hall, both to mark the position of the stack and to help support the compromised timber frame.

All later accretions were removed from the exterior, as were later ceilings and plaster. The original frame was found to be largely complete, albeit severely weakened by the insertion of dormer windows and subsidence. It was carefully braced back into position and repaired, making clear which was new timber. The roof was removed and the tiles rationalised, so that now plain clay tiles cover the medieval parts of the building and pantiles the 'more recent' additions, which include the 17th-century extension towards the green of the low end. The jaunty 'coxcomb' ridge tiles were reproduced from a surviving original. Clear evidence for the half-hip roof at the low end was found and so this was reinstated, a rare authenticated example in a medieval building.

For many years, New Inn functioned as two separate Landmarks, with shared use of the central hall, left unheated. By 2013, this arrangement had become unsatisfactory and so we decided to insulate the hall and install underfloor heating (fed by renewable energy via an air source heat pump) and a woodstove. To encourage its use further, the two lets were combined into a single Landmark for up to eight people.

Local tradition also called New Inn the Wool Hall, a building type honoured in Suffolk, but there is no evidence that any such formal function was ever attributed to it. In reality it is something rarer and more interesting, a forerunner of the great Coaching Inns which became such an important element of our country towns.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. New Inn sleeps up to 8 people. To book New Inn or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit our website www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone Booking Enquiries on 01628 825925.