The Landmark Trust

THE OLD HALL, CROSCOMBE, SOMERSET

The Old Hall is all that survives of the ancient manor house of Croscombe, abandoned by its owners by the 16th century, and adapted to serve as a Baptist chapel in about 1720. If it had survived in its original form to this day, added to no doubt but not substantially altered, it would have been one of Somerset's finest medieval houses, comparable with Clevedon or Coker Court. Even as it stands now, with the elaborate timber structure of its roof, its large traceried windows, and the array of doors leading off the former screens passage, it ranks as a hall of great importance, and certainly of great beauty.

There is no trace of the early medieval house, belonging to the Cotele family. But in the late 14th century the last Cotele left his property to a cousin, Robert Palton. Robert died in 1400 and was succeeded by his brother William, then aged twenty-one. It was William who rebuilt the manor house in about 1420, at the same time that he and other Croscombe families were restoring the parish church. The Palton coat of arms appears in both buildings, and on the tower of St. Cuthbert's, Wells.

William had no children, and on his death in 1449 his property passed to his second wife, Anne, who was a member of the Courtenay family, of Powderham in Devon. She soon married again, this time to another Devonian, a Densell of Weare Gifford. The manor of Croscombe was to remain as an outlying property of Devon landowners until c.1730. Anne's daughter by her second marriage, Elizabeth Densell, married Martin Fortescue of Filleigh, North Devon, and her Somerset property passed to that family. The Fortescues continued as absentee landlords for the following two centuries, but in the first half of the 18th century Hugh Fortescue, Earl Clinton, sold the greater part of his land there, mostly to existing tenants.

It is unlikely that the Fortescues made any use of the Croscombe manor house. They may have visited it occasionally, leaving it in the mean time in the charge of a steward. From surviving manorial accounts it seems that even by 1450 it was already partly let to tenants. Inevitably it decayed, and a wing at the eastern end (now lost) was rebuilt, on a smaller scale. The western end became a separate cottage. The hall itself survived, however, and was in use as a chapel by 1723; this possibly before the date at which, according to the Somerset historian Phelps, it was bought "by a respectable inhabitant of the place and converted into a chapel for the use of a congregation of Baptists". A memorial table to him, or more probably his son, is still in the hall.

The Baptists made several minor alterations to the chapel and to the cottage throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, all carefully noted down in the Church Books. In 1824 a tank was installed for baptisms, saving a cold plunge in the River Sheppey; new pews and a rostrum were fitted in 1866, a new ceiling in 1882, and repairs to the roof, the windows, and "colouring" were regularly carried out. For the most part the Old Hall could not have had better occupants, nursing the building into the present century. By 1973 the congregation had shrunk to only four or five, and the building was in danger of collapse at the eastern end. The cottage had been empty since 1947. It was in the nick of time that the Old Hall was discovered by the architect John Schofield, who shored up the gable himself, and persuaded the Baptists to sell. It was bought the Landmark Trust in 1975.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION OF THE OLD HALL

Landmarkers enter first today into the current kitchen. Originally, the main entrance would have led into the screens passage of the main hall. Today we enter the hall from the south, although originally the main entrance was through the grander doorway on the north, with the second doorway directly opposite, in the standard medieval pattern. Between these entrance doorways and the main body of the hall there stood a timber screen on a moulded stone base, two sections of which survive loose in the building. On the other side of the passage, in the end wall of the hall, are doors leading to the western wing. From the first door a stair led up to a chamber on the first floor. The other two doors led into service rooms off the hall, probably a buttery and a pantry.

For the moment, however, you are in the hall, and over your head is the sumptuous oak roof, divided into four bays, with five arch-braced trusses. Their smooth curves are echoed in the three tiers of windbraces on the side slopes, and by the unusual and elegant pear-shape formed by the struts in the apex, above the collar beam. Light floods in through three tall windows with carved stone heads, but in the south wall, at the High End, instead of a fourth window is a large blocked arch. This was not in fact another window, but the entrance to an oriel chamber. Today we think of an oriel as projecting from an upper floor, but in medieval times the term was applied to any small addition, and chiefly to a bay at the High End of a hall which could serve as a small private chamber for the lord. Sometimes this chamber also provided access into the main rooms beyond the hall, and this was the case at Croscombe. In the garden wall outside there is still the doorway that led from the oriel chamber into what was once a cross-wing; and in the outer face of the east wall can be seen the fireplace that heated the solar or upper room in this wing.

How was the hall itself heated? The answer seems to be by a fireplace in the end wall, on the dais. In about 1600 the solar wing was demolished and a new addition built in its place, with a new fireplace. The hall fireplace was dismantled and turned round to face the other way, and some fragments of moulded stone used to provide the lintel. This later fireplace is still there on the outside wall. The stove that heats the hall now is Gurney's Patent, and came from Romsey Abbey in 1976.

Light for the hall at night was provided by torches, and a remarkable survival is the bracket that held these, in the south wall. This bracket also helps us historically, since it bears the arms of the Palton family: Robert's with those of his wife Elizabeth Botreaux, and William's with those of his first wife, heiress to the Wellington family – thus providing evidence that William was the builder, after his marriage in about 1410.

From the hall you pass into the room that is now the kitchen. This was once divided, and both rooms were unheated; the existing fireplace is 19th century. The window over the sink is medieval, as are the ceiling joists, except for one section where it can be seen that new timber has been inserted, where the stairs to the upper floor were. Beyond the kitchen you are in a 19th century addition, into which a bathroom and staircase were fitted in 1976. At the top of the staircase, however, is a medieval doorway leading back into the chamber above the kitchen. This doorway connected, apparently via a staircase turret, with a wing which is thought to have extended southwards, to form one side of a courtyard on the site of the present garden. This wing may have contained the kitchens. The chamber itself has a medieval fireplace and window, but the blocked windows looking into the hall are much later, dating from the time when the manor house was in decline, and divided into several dwellings.

THE REPAIR OF THE OLD HALL

When the Landmark Trust took on the Old Hall in 1975 it was in an exceedingly shaky structural condition. Prompt action by John Schofield had prevented the collapse of the east gable, but a great deal more work was needed to stabilise the building. Surveys had already been carried out, and the medieval detail of the building discovered. Work was able to begin immediately, therefore, under the supervision of John Schofield and carried out by his firm, Artist Constructor's, own team of builders.

The tie beams of the Victorian ceiling had served one useful purpose, in that they were holding the north and south walls of the building together. The large windows set in thin, unbuttressed walls are one of the chief delights of the hall, but combined with the great weight of the roof are disastrous on practical grounds, because the walls were being forced outwards. Stainless steel rods have been fitted instead, doing the same job without obstructing the view of the roof. The roof itself was stripped and, only where absolutely necessary, the timber frame repaired. Elm boards, and insulation, were laid on this and the tiles replaced. Two new chimneys were built at the same time.

The repair of the east gable was inevitably more drastic. The top nine feet had to be dismantled entirely. A concrete ring beam was then cast running round the gable, extending some feet along the side walls, with legs descending further down into the end wall. The west gable had to be partly rebuilt as well, and most of the pointing raked out and renewed, although any that was sound was retained. Finally the walls were given several coats of limewash, coloured with yellow ochre.

The sills of the hall windows had been raised by the Baptists, and were now put back at their correct level. The two external doorways were unblocked and repaired. A doorway in the south-east corner was then blocked. The stonework in the base of the oriel arch was so disturbed, that only the upper part could be left visible internally. A small blocked window in the south wall of the west chamber was reinstated. The later windows in the western end were renewed, as was the glazing throughout the building, although old glass was re-used where possible.

Inside the hall, now restored to its true proportions by the removal of the ceiling, the service doors at the west end were unblocked and repaired, after the removal of the baptistry tank, which stood in front of them. The third door was left blocked, but with its surround visible. The Victorian suspended floor was removed (some of the boards were re-used in the bedrooms) but an attempt to recreate a lime-ash floor failed. Quarry tiles were laid instead, at the medieval level. The doors and the window shutters are, of course, new. As much old plaster was retained as possible, with missing areas made up in lime plaster to match. The walls are limewashed, again coloured with a little ochre for warmth.

In the kitchen the only alteration, apart from the provision of new fittings, was to remove a staircase from the north-west corner. The position of the medieval stair was left clear by laying the joists differently. It was decided to leave the floor at its 19th century level, rather than lower it to the level of the hall. The outside door, which occupies the position of a medieval window, was repaired. The arrangement of the rooms in the lean-to, including the stair, dates from 1975. The west chamber fireplace needed minor repairs, and a partition was removed. The Old Hall was furnished in 1976; all furniture is simple and solid, and the curtains were specially designed and printed for this building.

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