

# The Landmark Trust

## OXENFORD GATEHOUSE, ELSTEAD, SURREY

At first glance, Oxenford Gatehouse and the group of adjacent farm buildings could well be assumed to date from the Middle Ages. The farm known today as Oxenford Grange was indeed originally part of the holdings of Waverley Abbey near Farnham, the first Cistercian monastery in the country, founded in 1128. The adjacent fishpond dates from this time, and there was originally quite a fine dwelling, remnants of which the 4th Viscount Midleton used to construct the 'ruin' beside today's farmhouse. In 1536, Waverley (whose name inspired Sir Walter Scott to write his first novels, though they are set nowhere near Surrey) met the same fate as all English monastic institutions, and was dissolved by Henry VIII. Oxenford then passed through various owners until 1676 when it was amalgamated by Denzil, Lord Holles with the adjacent estate of Peper Harow. Eventually, in 1713, the Peper Harow estate was bought by Alan Brodrick, from a family that had made a substantial fortune in Ireland.

In 1717, Brodrick was created 1st Viscount Midleton (after a town on his Cork estates) for his services as Lord Chancellor of Ireland. This began the association of the Midleton family with Peper Harow, which was to last until the mid 20th century. In 1747, the 3rd Viscount demolished the old mansion at Peper Harow and commissioned William Chambers to build a new one. The family moved to Oxenford Grange for the duration, when not living in their London house. The new mansion was unfinished when the 3rd Viscount died in 1765, leaving his widow Albinia to complete it on behalf of their then 8-year old son, the 4th Viscount. Ten years later in 1785, the main house was finished and the 4th Viscount pulled down most of Oxenford Grange, leaving only today's farmhouse.

When the 4th Viscount died in 1836, his title passed to his only son, George Alan Brodrick, 5th Viscount Midleton. This pair had had a somewhat troubled relationship: George had been ostracised by his family for marrying Ellen Griffiths, a laundry maid in 1833, and was never reconciled with his father. He did eventually succeed in laying claim to the Peper Harow estate and Irish holdings as well as his title, and in 1841 began to think about enhancing the Peper Harow estate. Inspired by a mention in Hunt's Architecture about a gate lodge 'intended to have the appearance of being raised on the Ruins of a Priory,' Lord Midleton 'then thought, that a New Lodge might be built in strict accordance with the style of the Abbey of Waverley, & that I might arrange the Entrance, so as to see the Present Ruins which are now a pretty object but are not seen from the present Entrance.' His aspirations also extended to rebuilding nearby farm buildings in the Abbey Style, whose repair he had been purposely postponing.

For the design of these buildings (gatehouse, great barn and farm buildings, and also alterations to St Nicholas Church at Peper Harow and a shrine over a holy well called Bonfield Spring) he turned to A W Pugin, then thirty years old and at the height of his powers. Pugin is one of the great designers and architects of the first half of the nineteenth century, dedicating himself to a return to the pointed forms of architecture of the Middle Ages in the movement known as the Gothic Revival. A convert to Catholicism, Pugin designed numerous churches, monasteries and dwellings, as well as a stream of Gothic ornamentation and everyday objects. He also worked with Charles Barry on the Palace of Westminster, rebuilt in the Gothic style after it was destroyed by fire in 1834.

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Both Pugin and Lord Midleton were volatile and temperamental men, but their collaboration at Oxenford is rightly judged among Pugin's best work. Lord Midleton was a generous client and the gatehouse and other buildings are very well built of good local Bargate stone with Portland dressings. The gatehouse at least was built by Pugin's favourite builder, George Myers, who also built The Grange in Ramsgate (Pugin's own home, which was also being built 1843-4 and is today also cared for by Landmark).

The result represents Pugin's mature style at its height, an assured combination of simple medieval form and blocking with Regency theories of the Picturesque. The grouping embodies his theory of 'natural architecture' which he expounded in his *Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture* which he wrote and published during the Oxenford project. Pugin urged his readers to look for beauty in 'the mere essentials of construction' even in humble everyday structures like barns and sheds – an approach actualised by the Oxenford buildings.

Oxenford Gatehouse was completed in 1843. Pugin continued to work for Lord Midleton on the other Peper Harow projects until 1845, but by then Lord Midleton was in financial difficulties and distracted by his Irish affairs as the potato blight brought on the so-called Irish Potato Famine. Pugin later claimed Lord Midleton had not written to him for three years, and the latter's personal life was also again in disarray. He had fallen in love with Frederica Rushbrooke, a friend of his wife's, who then left him. On All Hallows' Day 1848, Lord Midleton dined alone at Peper Harow, took a candle up to a small room where a brazier was lit to dry wallpaper, lay down on a pillow on the floor and used the resultant fumes to asphyxiate himself. Pugin himself died just four years later, driven insane by overwork and mercury poisoning.

Landmark lets Oxenford Gatehouse on behalf of the present owners, whose family have farmed at Oxenford since the 1880s. We were happy to advise on its restoration through 2009, during which the landscaping was returned to its original levels, electrical cables buried and the building rewired. Modern internal finishes were removed and corrected, glazing replaced, a modern staircase removed and underfloor heating installed on the ground floor. Drawing on our experience at The Grange, in Ramsgate, also in Landmark's care and once Pugin's own home, the gatehouse has been furnished with furniture in Pugin's style or, in a few instances, designed by him.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Oxenford Gatehouse sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*