

The Landmark Trust

THE PARISH HOUSE, BALTONSBOROUGH, SOMERSET

The Parish House is a late-medieval church house, a specific building type that developed at this period. Between about 1450 and 1540, it is thought just about every parish in southern England had its church house. Baltonsborough was no exception. The church house was the equivalent of today's village hall, built by the community on a parcel of land given to it by the church authorities, often just to the west or south of the church. It was well-built in the local vernacular style, and a source of parish pride. Church houses also share certain characteristics of form: unusually large rooms on ground and first floors, often with a separate, external stair to reach that on the first floor, and a bread oven for communal baking.

The purpose of the church house was to allow the congregation to raise money for the upkeep of the parish church and its accoutrements, as was their duty, by the holding of 'church ales.' These ales were essentially village parties, provisioned by the communal brewing of beer and baking of bread, for which everyone paid an admission charge then put towards the church or community needs. A plentiful repast was also a source of parish pride, and the worthies of neighbouring villages might also be invited. Until the mid-15th century, such ales were held in the nave of the church itself, but the church authorities began to frown on such potentially raucous frivolities in a holy place.

Ales were regularly on church festivals (such as Whitsun ales) or they could be held for specific purposes, such as poor men's ales. Sometimes individual groups or guilds might hold ales, such as maidens' ales to raise money for the tapers to go in the Lady Chapel, or shepherds' ales and so on. The church house might also double as a lodging house for official visitors, or to host a troupe of touring actors, or to store the mummers' or morris dancers' costumes. It lay at the heart of Pre-Reformation village life.

However, after the liturgical changes of the Reformation in the 1530s and 40s, this aspect of village life was both suppressed and became redundant. Church authorities increasingly frowned on the idea of raising church funds with any kind of junketing, wherever it was held. Churches became plainer places, candles no longer lit in front of the images of saints to hasten prayers' passage to heaven. New ways were sought to raise money for the church upkeep – and the villagers sought different ways to party. 'Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?' declaims rollicking Sir Toby Belch to the puritanical Malvolio in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night – a direct reference to the tensions of parish life in the late 16th century as church ales fell out of custom. Church houses became instead schools, priest's houses, inns or private houses, their origins often vanishing from historical view.

Such was almost the fate of the Parish House. On the outside it is now disguised as an ordinary cottage in a row, but inside there is a great medieval fireplace and a splendid medieval roof, and it is one of the very few indeed still in use as a parish meeting place. In May 1989 the Landmark Trust received a letter from the Rev. B.H. Adams, Vicar of Butleigh, a neighbouring parish run together with Baltonsborough, asking for help.

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Rev. Adams wrote that the Baltonsborough church house had for a long time been occupied by a verger, but he had died and the house needed so much spent on it that the church could not afford it and would have to sell. What worried him was that the ground floor room was used as a church room and he would like to keep it. Would the Landmark Trust be prepared to buy the house, and let the parish keep the ground floor room? Landmark was interested in such an historic little building and realised how important it was that its original use should continue. The arrangement was agreed and Landmark bought the freehold, in days when our founder's backing still enabled such purchases. By great good luck the next-door cottage, Church View, came up for sale at the same time and we bought that too. About a third of the original church room, which was the main room on the first floor, extended into it and during the restoration that part was taken back into the Parish House. When it was repaired Church View was re-sold with covenants.

Restoration

When we took over the building the first priority was to regain the experience of entering the original church room. To achieve this the later 17th-century ceiling was removed. The dormer windows remained, blocked up, but the attic went and the fine medieval roof could be enjoyed once more. The trusses were intact but they needed re-pinning and repair, done by Leonard Hardy, who over many years has worked on many Landmark buildings, especially in the West Country. The first floor of Parish House was extended into Church View, so that all the trusses except for the one that was pulled down when the old church house became two cottages, are now again part of the Parish House.

On the ground floor the party wall remained where it was before, and this became the new parish meeting room. The partitions and passages which had accumulated during its life as a cottage were removed except for one original 17th-century wooden screen on the first floor, found within later plaster-work. It was repaired and now divides the sitting room from the main bedroom. The staircase was removed and re-built in a straight and simple form in the north wing. The first floor in the north wing was uncomfortably low so the level of the first floor was slightly altered. A new front door for the Landmark part of the house was inserted. On either side of the door in the kitchen is a limestone shelf that was probably used for maturing cheeses.

The house was re-roofed, re-using all the old 'double Roman' tiles that were sound; the window-frames were mostly rotten and had to be renewed. New oak floors were laid in the first floor rooms. The wirescape that festooned the front of the house was removed, the wires run underground instead, and the house was re-wired.

Parish parties may no longer be held beneath the fine medieval roof timbers on the first floor of the Parish House, but it is a source of considerable satisfaction to all concerned that, thanks to Landmark's intervention, the ground floor still fulfils at least part of its original purpose in parish life by providing meeting facilities for the parish. This precious example of an almost vanished building type also survives as an essential element in this quintessential English grouping around an ancient parish church.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Parish House sleeps up to 4 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk