

The Landmark Trust

PETERS TOWER, LYMPSTONE, DEVON

Peters Tower and the cottages around it were built in 1885 by William Peters in memory of his wife, Mary Jane. The Peters were a family of wealthy Liverpool merchants, who had made their money in the eighteenth century, trading with the American colonies (one branch of the family moved to Pennsylvania, where descendants still live). In the early nineteenth century, Ralph Peters III encouraged his three sons to take up careers not directly connected with trade, and in addition bought each of them a property in a different part of the country. William was the second son; he went into the army, where he served for a few years with the 7th Dragoons before his father settled on him the 400 acre estate of Harefield, in the parish of Lympstone. Harefield is a late Georgian house, rather plain (today, it is a preparatory school and the wider estate is managed by a family trust). William Peters seems to have had little difficulty in being accepted by the County establishment, taking on the traditional roles of JP and chairman of the local Conservatives. He died in 1896.

The following entry for Tuesday, 2 June, 1885 in *The Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* sets the scene after his wife's death:

Lympstone Memorial Tower

'The Memorial Tower and Cottages at Lympstone, erected by Mr W.H. Peters, of Harefield, in memory of his widely-revered wife, are rapidly approaching completion, and the work in its entirety will form a most fitting tribute of esteem and regard for the deceased lady, whose loss is much felt by all classes of society, especially by the poorer inhabitants of the parish. The memorial is erected on a piece of ground that was for a long number of years occupied by the New Inn, in the lower part of the town, and adjacent to the Railway Station. The cottages are just in the very place where the families which they are intended to accommodate would wish them to be - by the edge of the river, where the fishermen mostly congregate. The memorial buildings comprise a substantial clock-tower, some 70 or 80 feet high, and a commodious block of twelve cottages, suitable for small families. From the former a magnificent view of the estuary of the Exe can be obtained. The memorial cottages are arranged as a series of twelve convenient buildings, and will be let at a mere nominal rent, so that they will be a great boon to the class which they are intended to benefit. The whole work is now well forward, and will be inaugurated at no very distant date. The tower is a landmark for many miles around, and the structure is an object of prominence and much interest. The entire work has been under the superintendence of Mr Sivell, builder, of Lympstone, and reflects credit on him.'

No mention is made of an architect, but it is possible that there was none, the builder drawing up the design himself, perhaps after studying the Campanile in St. Mark's Square in Venice, or obtaining it from a pattern book. The tower was also intended to serve as a refuge for fishermen caught out in bad weather and unable to return to their homes in other villages along the estuary. A fireplace provided on the first floor allowed them to keep warm. The clock is a typical Victorian gesture to encourage good timekeeping, though for many years, until mechanical failure solved the problem, the striking of the clock at night was a source of complaint from many of its nearest neighbours.

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By 1980 however, the tower had long been a much-loved part of the scene and there was general concern at its increasing dereliction, and the damage being done to it by vandals. An initial application to turn the tower into holiday accommodation by the Harefield Trust, who owned it, was rejected on grounds of fire safety. So in 1982, the Harefield Trustees transferred it to the Landmark Trust who had greater experience in such matters.

Restoration and Conversion

The structural restoration of Peters Tower was mainly straightforward; a greater challenge was how to fit the amount of accommodation needed into the very small space available. It helped that all interior carpentry had anyway to be renewed, since the floors were rotten and the stairs collapsing. An extra floor was also inserted where the old clock mechanism had been. The principles of yacht design informed the arrangement of furniture and fittings. The architect, John Vivian, spent some time at Mashford's boatyard in Plymouth, and in a chandlery, before making his own plans for an interior that resembles that of a yacht, from galley kitchen to bunk beds. Teak (whose use in those days was less frowned upon) was used throughout, all corners are rounded off and light fittings and knobs are made of brass. The lanterns in the living room and the bathroom are copies of those on HMS Warrior, a 19th century ironclad battleship, then under restoration in Hartlepool with help from Landmark's founder, the late Sir John Smith, and the Manifold Trust. (Today, HMS Warrior can be visited in Portsmouth Docks).

Extra fire precautions were inevitably required. The County Fire Prevention Authority agreed that fixed fire escapes would not be practical, and that installing smoke detectors and using special 1-hour fire resistant timber for floors and doors would be precaution enough. To save as much space as possible the new staircase was to be a spiral and eventually a firm was found that made a good Victorian replica in cast aluminium - another yacht building material.

The external brickwork of the tower was in poor condition. Parts of the parapet, out of one corner of which an elder bush was growing, had to be rebuilt completely; in several places bricks had to be replaced. In the most visible places old bricks were re-used, obtained by unblocking windows on the north and south elevations. However, the white bricks of the quoins and parapet facing had worn worse than the red and also needed to be renewed. These had come originally from Newton Abbot, but they are no longer made there. Luckily a new source was discovered in Totnes, and so replacement was possible. The whole of the exterior was cleaned using bristle and soft wire brushes before repointing.

As for the roof, although the rafters were mostly sound, the boarding and the wall plates were rotten. These were replaced and the original slates relaid. The leadwork was also renewed, as were the gable louvres and the access door. The finishing touches to the restoration were of course the repair of the clock and the weather vane. Very little of the latter survived in good condition - most of the scroll work and two of the letters had to be renewed - but what remained was cleaned and repaired. The forge that did the work, Erme Wood Forge, Ivybridge, also made the new fanlight above the front door (itself the old one repaired). The original hand-wound mechanical clock had unfortunately deteriorated beyond the point where it would be possible to get it going again without almost complete rebuilding. The actual clock faces, and the bell, were perfectly all right however; after minor repairs by Smith of Derby they are now fulfilling their proper function but with a new electric motor, complete with restart unit, striking mechanism and - since anticipatory protests were immediately voiced by nearby residents - night-time silencing.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Peters Tower sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.