

# The Landmark Trust

## THE PRIEST'S HOUSE, HOLCOMBE ROGUS, DEVON

The name Priest's House is misleading as this building was probably built c1500 as a Church House, of which more survive in Devon than anywhere else. They were successors to the communal, or Lord's brew-house, and the predecessor of the village hall. Everything from church feasts and "ales" to raise money for the parish church, to the feeding and housing of travellers and the poor took place under their roofs.

They were built mainly during the 15 and 16th centuries but church ales were outlawed during the Reformation and in the late 17th/early 18th centuries church houses became inns or poor-houses, or simply houses or cottages. Village tradition has it that it was at one time the priest's house, and hence its present name; this could have arisen from a misunderstanding, but it could also be true - two fireplaces were added probably in the 17th century. This may have been done to adapt the building for use as a lodging for the priest before the present vicarage was built in the 18th century. After that, it seems, the house became an outbuilding for Holcombe Court, probably with some sort of agricultural use, and its ownership actually passed from the parishioners to the Lord of the manor. This could have happened very easily when the squire and the parson were united in the person of the Rev. Robert Bluett, between 1725 and 1749.

A single storey waggon shed was added on the south at about this time and it seems likely that the wide openings in the east wall of the Priest's House were also made then. It was these that caused the wall to bulge, so that they were later blocked up, and the buttresses built to prevent collapse, at some time in the 19th century.

By 1858 the Priest's House was described as "ruinous", but in 1915 *Country Life* reported that the then owner, Mrs Rayer, had "assisted to put in order the old Church House". But on closer examination an architectural conundrum emerges - is the moulded ceiling nearly original or a recent insertion? It turns out that the first floor frame will only fit the building if the east wall is in its present leaning position; there would not be room for it if the wall was vertical. So is the ceiling itself an addition, but an early one, in that it appears to be of much the same date as the rest of the building? But there is no evidence elsewhere in the building for such an alteration.

So we come to another village tradition, that the floor frame came out of Holcombe Court. This would be perfectly possible, especially if it was done as part of Mrs Rayer's restoration c.1900. But once again there is evidence against this solution of the problem. The positions of the original partitions, now reinstated, were clear from the mortices in the undersides of the cross-beams, and they fit in very well with the likely lay-out of the original church house: would that be so if the ceiling came from elsewhere?

Also in 1868 there is a reference to three rooms - a kitchen, a refectory ("adorned with moulded beams"), and a cellar or store-room - which fits the division of the ground floor, and implies that there were partitions still there. An ornamental ceiling of some sort must therefore have existed then too.

So there you have two arguments: the ceiling as nearly original, or as a recent insertion. Plenty of evidence can be produced against either, while nothing very solid can be said in their favour.

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## RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

Unlike its history, the restoration of the house did not prove complicated, and was completed in only about nine months. This was because the building itself was basically sound. The north gable did have to be taken down, as did the two chimneys, but otherwise the walls only needed some repointing. One half of the roof had been renewed in the 1960's when a tree had fallen on it in a gale, bringing down both part of the west wall as well. As a result, the northern half was covered in Welsh slate, and the southern in local Treborough slates. The latter were salvaged and used for the stable roof, but the house is now covered with new Delabole slates, which are more in character with the originals. The roof structure itself needed only minimal repair.

The windows were also in good condition, needing only minor repairs, and in some cases a new lintel or cill, and reglazing. All the repairs were made in oak. Three new oak windows were inserted, copied from the originals; one on the west in the doorway to the Court, which, being no longer required, was blocked up; and two on the east in old openings, although to make one, an 18th century tombstone had to be carefully moved. Inside, the great fireplace lintel and the chimney above it needed some reinforcing with steel ties and bearers, and the lintel itself, which was found to be hollow, has been strengthened by the injection of epoxy resin.

The floor frame itself needed some repair, to the end of beams for example, and one section which was charred has been renewed. The burn mark on the west fireplace was only made quite recently however, while the house was used as a builder's store.

The partitions are entirely new, though in old positions, and copying what was there originally. The oak, like that of the windows, has simply been waxed. The floor is of Hamstone flags, which matched the sandstone in the great fireplace. Much old lime plaster survived on the walls, and this has been patched, and then limewashed to a colour close to what was there before.

The soffits, or undersides of the ceiling boards, have, like the new staircase, been painted a good medieval red. Traces of such a red can just be seen on the oak newel post, which has been left uncovered.

Upstairs new partitions have been inserted - there probably wouldn't have been any originally, since the village feasts would have been held there, with people seated at trestle tables - and also a ceiling. This was necessary because otherwise the bedrooms would have been too high for their size, and the northern half of the roof is in any case undistinguished. The apex of the original roof can be seen through a trap door.

The big chimney breast has been cut back to make extra room. To provide soundproofing and insulation, felt was laid on the existing deal floorboards - which probably date from c.1900 - and then on top, lying crossways, wider elm boards.

In the church house, a type of building which has not existed for some centuries, there took place some of the most popularly imagined scenes of Mediaeval and Tudor life - the stomping of feet, the merry revellers; in this house it is easy to imagine.

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