

# The Landmark Trust

## ROBIN HOOD'S HUT, NR. GOATHURST, SOMERSET

Robin Hood's Hut was built by Sir Charles Kemeys Tynte in the late 1760s to adorn the re-landscaping of his estate at Halswell Park, Goathurst. There had been Halswells on the estate since before 1280. John Tynte, from an ancient Somerset family, married the last Haswell, Jane Kemeys, in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1689, their son and Sir Charles's father Sir Halswell Tynte added a fine new range in the style of Wren to the existing Tudor manor, part of which remained as the service areas. It was probably Sir Halswell who created a formal garden below Halswell House, but by the time Sir Charles inherited the estate in 1740, gardening fashions had changed. Sir Charles shared a passion for creating picturesque landscapes with two good friends, Henry Hoare II of Stourhead and Coppelstone Warre Bampfylde of Hestercombe. Together they created three of the finest picturesque gardens of their day. Stourhead and Hestercombe are happily largely restored and open to the public, but Halswell Park became fragmented and degraded, especially once the estate left the family in 1948.

Sir Charles was a typical 'country gentleman' of the 18th century. He served as MP for Somerset for almost thirty years. He did all the typical works of his day, combining benevolence with self interest: he straightened local roads to facilitate the passage of his carriage and built almshouses for the poor of the parish next door to St Edward's Church in Goathurst. Sir Charles also spent long periods in London. In his absence, his estate was run by his steward, Richard Escott, whose task it was to ensure that his master's 'Scheming' on his gardens remained in line with income from the estate.

As in all great gardens, Sir Charles manipulated and highlighted the natural features of his estate to stimulate and enhance visitors' emotions. In a belt of woodland known as Mill Wood, he created a series of linked ponds, with a Bath Stone Bridge and a Druid's Temple. Nearer Halswell House were several more structures – a stepped pyramid, a small rotunda, a rockwork screen and a memorial to a favourite horse. At the foot of the hill, Sir Charles built the Temple of Harmony, based on designs in Palladio's *Quattro Libri* and holding a statue of Terpsichore, muse of dance carved by John Walsh. Robert Adam is known to have had a hand in the interior work.

Robin Hood's Hut was built around the same time, both to be looked at, and to be visited and looked out from. Its name has less to do with Robin of Locksley than the fashionable 18th-century allusion to ancient English liberties that Robin defended. There is a preliminary design for the building by Henry Keene in the V & A. The hut was positioned to take advantage of the stunning panorama from the ridge. Just as today, the unsuspecting visitor would approach through a belt of woodland, stumbling upon a rustic thatched cottage suggestive of hermits and witches to an 18th-century sensibility. Entering a dark and gloomy space, the rear doors would then be flung open by the host to reveal the glory of the view north across to the Bristol Channel and to Wales beyond. The view was admired from an elegant Gothic umbrella or canopy, with a plaster frieze of trailing vines and a plasterwork dome moulded in imitation of swagged drapery thought to be by Thomas Stocking. There is some evidence that this umbrella was added or revised later, reminiscent of Batty Langley's popular patterns for such estate buildings.

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After admiring the view, visitors could then retire to the elegant 'china room' to the right of the front door. Refreshments would have been provided by servants from the little kitchen on the other side, which could then only be entered from the outside. The remains of the range are still there. The servants were not to be distracted by the view and so the north window is, and has always been, blind.

The Tyntes (later Kemeys-Tyntes) owned Halswell Park until 1948. The gardens decayed steadily through the 20th century. Parcels of land were sold, statues carted away, buildings crumbled. The umbrella at Robin Hood's Hut collapsed. Finally, in 1995 a proposal to demolish the Temple of Harmony so incensed local opinion that the Halswell Park Trust was formed to protect and reconsolidate what remained of the gardens. The Somerset Building Preservation Trust (SBPT) acquired the freehold of the Temple and repaired it. Then in 1995 Mr John Tuckey generously acquired and gave Robin Hood's Hut to the SBPT. With grants from English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund, they rebuilt the umbrella, rethatched the roof, replaced windows and floors and rendered and limewashed the exterior. The interior was left bare, the shutters, other joinery and chimneypiece being based on fragments of the originals. The hut was returned to its original role as shining eyecatcher. However, it soon became clear that it would quickly deteriorate again if left mostly cold and empty on this exposed spot. In 2000, the SBPT approached the Landmark Trust to help with a new use for the building. We were delighted to do so.

### **Restoration by Landmark**

In autumn 2003, work began to fit out the interior for use as a Landmark. Electricity was introduced and a borehole sunk to provide water. One problem was how to provide a bathroom. We were keen to protect the original spaces in the buildings and therefore wanted to avoid partitioning any of the chambers. We decided to house the bathroom in a small, detached hut, fully insulated but with reference to the tradition for such rustic huts in Sir Charles's day (the Witch's Hut at Hestercombe is another such). Another decision was to form a doorway between the current kitchen and bedroom. The former servants' room had two recesses. One of these contained a cooking hearth and has been kept and a new door has been inserted in the other and allows the building to be lived in satisfactorily. Sir Charles had a clear idea of the hierarchy of the three rooms, which we have tried to respect. In a letter in 1767, he wrote 'And, as for the Building on the Hill in the Park, the first room, wch I call the hermits room, must have an earthen floor, the Kitchen on the left, a brick and the little room, for china, must be boarded.'

**China Room** The current joinery (shutters, sill boards, architraves and skirtings) is as done by the SBPT. The elm floorboards were also laid by the SBPT, loosely to combat serious dampness in the past. The absence of curtains is deliberate, accepting that shutters were the usual form of window dressing in such estate buildings.

**The Hermit's Room or Kitchen** Architecturally, this room is essentially a lobby. It also continues to serve the purpose of antechamber to the drama of the panorama, and both these aspects have directed the arrangement of the kitchen. We also decided to replicate the earthen floor instructed by Sir Charles, using a *battuto* technique. *Battuto* means 'beaten', as brick and tile fragments are crushed and then compacted in a breathing lime concrete.

**The Servants' Room or Bedroom** has been kept much as it was. The tiled floor is thought to be original and has been disturbed as little as possible. The vestiges of the cooking hearth remain, while the recess which must once have held shelving for utensils and pots has been breached to form the new door.

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