

The Landmark Trust

SHELWICK COURT, NEAR HEREFORD

In 1981 Shelwick Court was in a ruinous condition, on the brink of total collapse. For many years its elderly owner, Mr John Orgee, had lived in a caravan beside it, the house having been declared unfit to live in. After his death in 1977, his heirs thought there was no alternative to demolition.

When the County Conservation Officer visited Shelwick Court, to see whether the building held any architectural interest apart from its charming stone front of about 1680 he found that on the east wall, plaster had fallen off to reveal timber framing of an early type with ornamental braces. Venturing inside the eastern bedrooms, he found all the signs to indicate a medieval roof above - moulded posts and the foot of an arched brace. A dangerous scramble in the attic confirmed that there was indeed a medieval roof, a very fine one of about 1400.

The Conservation Officer spotted the building and then approached the Landmark Trust, as a charity which rescues small and endangered historic buildings and gives them a new life by letting them for holidays. Landmark agreed to take the house on, a sale was agreed with the owner and completed in 1981.

The History of Shelwick Court

While the restoration was in progress, some very interesting discoveries were made about this building. First of all, only the eastern part is medieval. This range, which runs from north to south, did not contain a great hall, as was first supposed, but always had two storeys, with a great chamber on the first floor and other rooms below. This it seems was the cross-wing of a larger house and lay at the western end of a vanished great hall. The other side of the quatrefoil panels which you can now see in the great chamber would have appeared inside this hall.

Who lived in this hall house? Unfortunately, we cannot say for certain. The manor of Shelwick belonged from the time of the Domesday survey to the Bishops of Hereford. There is no evidence that they had a manor house for their own use here, but there may have been a house for their steward. While you would not expect this to have been large or grand, it would probably have been where the manorial courts were held. The name Shelwick Court could therefore have some significance. Alternatively, the bishop may have granted the manor to someone else, who then built a house for themselves - though again there is no evidence for this.

The most curious thing is that the whole wing has been taken down and rebuilt. We cannot say if it has always stood on its present site, or if it has been moved from somewhere else. This rebuilding seems to have happened about 1680, when a new first floor, attic and central chimney were inserted. Box-framed wings were added on the west side at the same time using much old timber. These formed a double gable (one of which no longer stands) making the house into a square block with a staircase in the middle of the north side. This new house was given a regular south front in stone with cross-mullion windows and a central door around the same time.

Shelwick Court was by this time the house of a prosperous farmer which it continued to be until it entered its slow decline in the post-war years, a decline which nearly ended in disaster. Its fortunes are now happily reversed, and its rare interior can be enjoyed by a succession of different visitors through the Landmark Trust.

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RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The restoration was carried out 1982-4 under the supervision of the architect John Schofield, of the Bristol firm Architecton. The builders were Beavan and Hodges of Hereford. There were two main aims behind Landmark's restoration of Shelwick Court. The first, and most urgent, was to return the building to a sound structural condition. The second was to reveal the fine medieval chamber inside, but to maintain its disguise on the outside by preserving the additions made to it in about 1680. This meant removing an attic floor and the upper section of a chimney, and renewing a missing truss at the south end as a gable, breaking intriguingly through the front slope of the roof.

As the ground floor had always been divided the lower stage of the chimney could be kept, with its fireplace on one side and ovens on the other. It also supports a ring-beam of reinforced concrete which the engineers advised forming around the front half of the building. This anchors steel ties running through the wall to plates on the outside, holding the two skins of stone together. The original design of the south front was restored at the same time by removing a porch and some brick buttresses.

Repair of the medieval wing was more complicated, the idea being to keep new timber to a minimum. Only where an element was visually or structurally essential was it renewed - where a section of collar-beam had been cut away for the chimney, for example, or where part of the northern tie beam had rotted. In two cases where joints had failed, steel plates were inserted to hold the truss, rather than go in for wholesale renewal. In this way just about everything visible is medieval workmanship.

In the wall frames, some panels of both original and 17th century wattle and daub survived. These were kept if possible, and new wattle and daub was formed around them. The traditional method of mixing the daub was used, complete with cow dung. Inside, the panels were finished with a coat of lime-hair plaster, leaving the timber frame exposed. Outside, however, tradition was departed from. For reasons both of strength and economy the walls were clad in weather-boarding. This is usually found on barns in Herefordshire, but is occasionally seen on houses, and there was in fact some already at Shelwick Court.

The great chamber did not originally have a fireplace, but it was felt that one would be desirable now, so a new chimney was built against its western wall. The oak floorboards are also new. Surviving 17th century mullion and transom windows were retained at either end.

In the rooms below, medieval framing has been exposed. Fragments of a medieval window were uncovered in the wall between the bedroom and the entrance hall. In the south room a beam with painted decoration was discovered, apparently dating from the late 1500s. The beam itself was in poor condition so the painted surface was cut off and applied to a new composite beam which supports the new ceiling. The decoration itself was cleaned and consolidated. New windows were fitted in the north room, and new softwood floors in both.

Round the staircase and south-west wing the walls were repaired on the same principles as the east wing, and then the weather-boarding carried on round. Two 17th-century windows survived intact on the staircase, the small top one still with its original glass and lead. The stair itself was repaired with new oak and its 19th-century balusters were replaced with more simple ones.

Inside this part of the building, while the rooms all have new partitions, traditional materials were used - lime-hair plaster and limewash on the walls; salvaged stone flags or quarry tiles on the floors. Throughout the house as many old doors as possible were reused. The glass for the new windows comes from 19th century greenhouses. The roof above is covered in salvaged clay plain tiles. In this way, a harmony between new and old is achieved.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Shelwick Court sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.