

The Landmark Trust

SHUTE GATEHOUSE, NR. AXMINSTER, DEVON

Gatehouses have an ancestry going back to the Middle Ages. The spur for their development came with the change in the 12th and 13th centuries from castles with a single impregnable keep, to the more familiar type, which had its strength concentrated in an outer curtain wall. The weakest point in the defences was the entrance, which therefore needed the strongest fortification; and so there appeared a new type of building - the gatehouse. Most domestic gatehouses date from the late 14th and 15th centuries. When life became more peaceful from the late 15th century, gatehouses gradually came to be regarded as status symbols to impress rather than as a means of protection as were at Shute.

Shute was originally a medieval house behind, much enlarged and remodelled around 1500 by Cicely Bonville who married Thomas Grey, Marquess of Dorset. In 1554 the Grey's house was forfeited to the Crown, eventually being sold to William Pole of Colyton, who made it his home. It was probably his son, Sir William Pole, a writer and Antiquary who built the gatehouse after succeeding in 1587. With its battlements and possibly genuine medieval gargoyles, the style is consciously antiquarian. During the restoration by the Landmark Trust, evidence was discovered that the window on the top floor had once formed a nearly continuous band with the windows in the turrets, in keeping with the 'more glass than wall' fashion of the time.

With windows of this kind allowing a 'fair prospect' it is likely that the upper room was used as a belvedere or outlook, probably to watch the hunt taking place in the old deer park on the hill opposite. On its other side, the gatehouse would have opened into a forecourt or courtyard, and there is evidence that the gatehouse was at least roughly aligned on the porch in the main front of the old house. The existing flanking walls probably incorporate earlier and lower walls that would have enclosed this forecourt. The entrance to the rooms over the gate arch would have been by outside steps.

After the building activity at Shute in the 15th and 16th centuries, little more was done for two hundred years, and it is likely that for most of the 18th century the house saw only the minimum of maintenance. With Shute by this time probably dilapidated, John William Pole, who had inherited Shute as a three-year old orphan, set about building a new Shute House, on an entirely new site, in the light and restrained style of Robert Adam. He preserved the old gatehouse as an interesting entrance to his newly landscaped park, with the drive passing through it and on up to his modern mansion on the hill. Unfortunately, the greater part of the old Bonville house blocked the intended route, and so this was demolished, leaving only what might have been the medieval high end, as adapted in the Tudor period. Round the gatehouse itself, the ground was made to run up to parapet height on refashioned screen walls.

What is not known is whether the gatehouse was lived in as well as the side lodges. Records come only with the first full census return of 1841, which lists two households under 'Lodge' and 'Lodge Wing'. This, and later census returns show the buildings to be occupied by a variety of families, probably employed on the farm or estate, involved in various trades such as agricultural labourers, carpenters, gardeners and a dairyman. By 1871, one occupier was Job Adams, a bailiff or farm manager, either for the Shute estate or the tenant of Shute Barton.

The final stages

During the 1870's the two side lodges were taken down and replaced by the existing pavilions, which echo the Elizabethan architecture of the gatehouse itself. A carpenter's shop which had been on the site also disappeared in the general tidying up. In 1926, the Shute estate was inherited by Sir John Carew-Pole. He lived at Antony in Cornwall, and so not requiring Shute House, it became a girls' school in 1933. Shute Barton continued as a tenant farm until, after being empty for some time, Sir John repaired it and gave it to the National Trust in 1959.

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The last people to live in the gatehouse were the Newbys. Mr Newby was a caretaker to the school, and his wife, Mary, the daughter of a former agent for the Shute estate, continued to live on in the gatehouse after her husband's death, without running water or electricity until about 1958, when ill-health forced her to move out. It remained empty from then until 1981, with the arrival of the first Landmark clients.

The repair of the Gatehouse

When The Landmark Trust first saw Shute gatehouse in 1978, it was decaying rapidly. The Trustees agreed to a lease from the National Trust and appointed Paul Pearn as the architect, responsible for the restoration of several Landmarks. The builders were J. Trivett & Co. whose foreman Philip Ford went on to work directly for Landmark for a number of years.

Much of the work consisted of redoing what had been not very well done in the 19th century. The badly constructed roof was replaced with a more sensible one reusing the existing slates. Problems of damp were largely caused by cement render on the back and side walls. Once hacked off, the underlying stonework was worse than expected. The parapet and north east wall next to the stair were found to be in danger of collapse, necessitating a concrete ring beam to hold it all together.

The parapet itself was rebuilt, using where necessary, the original Beer limestone from the same quarry a few miles away. The back and side walls were given a new coat of lime-based render so allowing the walls to breathe. On the front, the local flint-like stone, Chert, was lightly cleaned, and new Beer stone let in to the window surrounds and mullions. The walls of the gatehouse and the screen walls were repointed with lime mortar, and the crenellations patched with new stone. The upper pavilion, being in better condition and nearer to the front door, was chosen as an extra bedroom.

The interior had suffered badly from the damp and most of the joinery was beyond repair. Sadly, this included the 17th century overmantel of a fireplace that had been inserted in the lower room where the bathroom now is. Several of the joists of the upper floor had rotted, and these had to be jacked up and supported with steel angle irons.

The plan was to reverse the 19th century layout, and have the upper room, with its original fireplace and better views, as a single room again, with the lower floor containing the bedrooms. New joinery - floorboards, skirtings, doors and the stairs - was needed throughout, and old well-seasoned pine was used, the stair being a near copy of the original. The doors were based on a design that was common around 1600. The lead in the casement windows needed renewing, but where possible the old glass was re-used.

There has been one addition - the fish ceiling. It dates from about 1620, and came from No. 7 Cross Street, Barnstaple, a house demolished in the 1930's. North Devon District Council had kept it in store, but had finally come to the conclusion that they must dispose of it, for lack of space. When they heard of the restoration of Shute Gatehouse, however, they very generously offered it to us. It arrived at Shute in pieces which had to be assembled with great care, the missing areas filled in, and a new pendant formed. All this was done by Trivett's craftsmen.

Undergrowth was cleared from the building, and as some very fine elms in front of the gatehouse had died of Dutch elm disease, they were cut down and the ground was levelled and laid out as a green.

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