

The Landmark Trust

THE STEWARD'S HOUSE, ST MICHAEL'S STREET, OXFORD

The Oxford Union Society was formed in 1823 by twenty-five undergraduates, under the name of the United Debating Society. Its establishment as a freely speculating and speaking club was initially viewed with hostility by the University authorities. In December 1825, the Society was tactically dissolved and two days later a new Oxford Union Society bought the benches and books from the now defunct United Debating Society.

It was not until 1829 that the Society acquired premises of its own: a room in which to hold the debates at Wyatt's, 115 High Street, with a reading room nearby. Membership increased rapidly, and by 1847 the need for a new and permanent home had become extreme. A committee was appointed to work out how this was to be achieved, in view of the Union's permanent financial straits. A scheme was devised by Dr Bliss, Principal of St Mary's Hall, by which graduates could become life members on payment of a single subscription of £10 – which would generate a steady income – while he himself provided a personal loan of £3000 to purchase a site between Frewin Court and St Michael's Street. There they could erect their own debating hall, with whatever other accommodation they thought necessary.

The architect chosen for the Union's new home was Benjamin Woodward, designer of the University Museum where he had collaborated with John Ruskin. Work began on the new buildings in 1853 and was completed in 1857. That year, Woodward showed two young men round the nearly completed debating hall. They were D. G. Rossetti and William Morris, then an undergraduate at Exeter College where Edward Burne Jones was also a student. Morris and Rossetti had only recently met and found each other inspired by the same ideals of artistic Brotherhood. On the spur of the moment, they offered to decorate the window bays above the debating hall gallery, where the Union library was to be housed. The glorious murals that resulted, on the theme of Arthurian legend, were painted on ill-prepared grounds by the enthusiastic but inexperienced artists, and soon began to fade.

By the 1870s, the Union had once more outgrown its debating chamber and Alfred Waterhouse was commissioned to build a bigger one. The Old Debating Hall was all given over to library use. In 1910-11, it was again decided to extend the Union's premises, this time to the design of Messrs Mills and Thorpe of Oxford. At the north end of the extension, a house was built for the Steward of the Union, described at the time as 'in the Tudor style and ... handsomely fitted'. The Steward was a mostly avuncular figure of authority, appointed to oversee the smooth running of the facilities.

When the Union launched its appeal for funds to restore the Old Debating Hall in the early 1980s, the Trustees of the Landmark Trust were immediately interested. They were in any case more than willing to support the restoration programme, both of the building and of the wall-paintings inside it, but there was the chance too that here was a long-wished-for opportunity to make a Landmark right in the centre of Oxford, John and

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Christian Smith both being Oxford alumni. So while offering to support the restoration financially, they also enquired whether there was any part of the Union building that was no longer used, and which could be converted into a flat.

It so happened that in 1983 the Steward, Walter Perry, was about to retire and the Committee of the Oxford Union Society decided to take the opportunity to reorganise and reduce their staff. The old office of Steward was to be done away with and his work combined with other jobs for a non-resident House Manager. So the Steward's House at the end of the north wing and with its own entrance on to St Michael's Street was to fall empty. Part of it was already used for kitchens and staff offices, but there was no obvious future use for the bedrooms on the first floor and accordingly these were offered to the Trust, with part of the ground floor as well.

A 40 year lease on the flat was drawn up in 1985, plans were prepared, and work started in 1986.

Restoration

Only a small amount of exterior work had to be carried out, repairing gutters and adjoining flat roofs to prevent damp entering; and cleaning the stonework of the windows, with some minor repairs. Then there was the work needed to make the flat into a separate unit blocking off communication with other parts of the ground floor and putting up a solid partition between the first floor landing and the main staircase (which also necessitated moving the bedroom door slightly).

After this the only work necessary was to give the interior and services a general overhaul, renewing plaster, installing heating and so on.

A large cupboard was removed on the landing, and the balustrade of the staircase was extended round to the wall. The smallest bedroom became the kitchen, the largest a sitting room. Otherwise everything was left as it was; the main rooms still have their cornices and fireplaces; the doors, complete with furniture, are all original, as is the mahogany flap-table on the landing. The bath has since been replaced.

All that remained to be decided was the decoration and furnishing, and here the choice was to go for a sense of donnish comfort, fit perhaps for a don of the era before the First World War who had grown up under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, perhaps even been at the University with Morris and Burne-Jones and looked on at their work in the Debating Hall, and who still clung to their tastes and ideas. So the hall and stairs have William Morris's Larkspur, wallpaper the sitting room has Marigold, and the bedroom Sunflower.

William Gill, the Steward who first occupied these rooms, would perhaps have filled them with military trophies and mementos of India; a don would no doubt have covered the floor and the tables with books. You can fill them as you will, with your own experience of Oxford.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Steward's House sleeps up to 2 people.

To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk