

The Landmark Trust

STOKER'S COTTAGE HISTORY SHEET

Situated at the southern end of the fens, Stretham has been a part of the fen drainage schemes since the days of the famous Dutch engineer, Cornelius Vermuyden and his co-adventurer, the Duke of Bedford. In 1631, they cut the (Old) Bedford River and the Great Ouse became the canalised loop now known as the Old West River. This and other drainage schemes brought problems of their own; land still needed draining in between the major cuts, and the peat began to waste, leaving watercourses such as the Old West River standing ever higher above the levels. Windmills provided an initial solution to these changes in the land's equilibrium, scooping the water up from the drainage channels and into the main watercourses. The lifts involved became ever greater, however, and wind is an unpredictable power source. By the early nineteenth century, another solution was urgently required.

In 1829, the Waterbeach Level Commissioners commissioned the Butterley Company of Derbyshire for a rotative steam engine to drain the district, an area of some 5,600 acres. A separate contractor constructed the buildings to house the new engine, and of the surviving grouping the engine house, scoopwheel house, boiler house and seventy five-foot chimney all date from 1831, built in good cream stocks typical of the Gault clays of the area. The Stretham engine was among the earliest and largest of its type in the fens, a typical example of its type and age.

To summarise briefly (the Engine Trust's publications provide more detailed descriptions), the Butterley Company's steam engine provided 60 nominal horse power from a double-acting, condensing beam. The flywheel, which transferred the power from beam to scoopwheel, is 24 feet in diameter and turned at 12-16 revolutions a minute, running off a 39 inch bore cylinder with a 96 inch stroke. The beam engine was driven by the two (and later three) boilers, delivering a pressure of 4 pound per square inch (raised to 8 psi in 1888). The stoker kept the boilers running, with the chimney belching smoke above; coal consumption was around 5 tons for 24 hours running time. This power drove the enormous scoopwheel, which turned at 3-4 revolutions a minute and could lift 30 tons of water per revolution, 100 tons a minute. The engine did not, of course, run continuously but was fired up when floods threatened.

Stretham Steam Engine performed its purpose successfully until 1925 when a Mirrlees diesel engine took over, housed in the large building behind Stoker's Cottage. The Old Engine was kept a role as nominal standby until 1957, when the Stretham Engine Trust was formed to preserve it against demolition. The engine and scoop wheel are still occasionally turned over using electrical power for demonstration purposes.

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Stoker's Cottage was originally built in 1840 as a toll house, collecting tolls from animals using the banks for their maintenance. The cottage was probably partially built of eighteenth-century bricks salvaged from the windpump the engine replaced (they can be seen in the end gable, given away by the redness of their clay and shallow depth). When the railways arrived in the area just five years later, tolls dropped dramatically, making a toll keeper no longer necessary. Since very few engine houses supplied a dedicated cottage for a stoker, the Stretham stoker was fortunate to inherit the toll house.

The first stoker known to have lived in the cottage was Mr Murfitt, who held the position from 1855 to 1900. Mr Duesbury followed him until 1911, when William Taylor took over. When he retired in 1933, the diesel engine had taken over and Assistant Engineer, C. O. Clarke moved in. When Mr Clarke became Superintendent in 1943, he moved into the Superintendent's House on the other side of the site and for the next ten years or so, the cottage was lived in by men working on the level. The last residents were Mr & Mrs Vail, who left in 1955. The cottage had neither water nor electricity at that stage, with water drawn from a pump behind the Superintendent's House and carried to the cottage in buckets. The only light was by candle or oil lamp. Cooking was done over the solid fuel range that still survives in the back kitchen, with a bread oven to one side. On the other side was a copper, in which water would be heated on washday and for the weekly bath, taken in a galvanised steel bath normally kept outside. With no washbasin or sink, all ablutions or washing up would simply have been done in a bowl at the table, and the loo, of course, was in the privy outside.

In 1994, the Stretham Engine Trust carried out comprehensive repairs to the cottage and installed water and electricity. The cottage was then used for low key visitor services for those visiting the Old Engine site, but the Trust became concerned about maintenance costs. In 2005, the Trust approached Landmark for help, aware that use of the cottage as a Landmark would remove the financial burden of its upkeep, increase public access for the site and help raise further the profile of Stretham Old Engine. Landmark was happy to help and relatively little work needed to be done. The outside was gently repointed and a large concrete reservoir tank to the rear was filled in. Two old garages and a shed were removed. The cottage was redecorated inside and out and a French drain put in across the front to alleviate damp. A new kitchen and bathroom were put in (keeping the old range) and a 1950s fireplace was replaced with something more in keeping with the cottage's age. The cottage has been furnished to evoke its age and setting, a peaceful spot in which to reflect upon the glories of the Age of Steam.

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