

The Landmark Trust

TIXALL GATEHOUSE, NR. STAFFORD

Tixall Gatehouse was acquired in 1968 by the Landmark Trust, a charity founded three years earlier to rescue endangered historic buildings, and to give them a new life and a future. The Gatehouse was definitely a building at risk. Following the demolition of Tixall Hall in 1927, it had stood abandoned. Its roof, floors and windows had gone, and there was a danger that the walls too would soon begin to fall.

The earliest description of Tixall Gatehouse can be found in *Erdeswick's Survey of Staffordshire* of 1598. The author describes how Sir Walter Aston had 'beautified, or defaced (I know not which to say)' the fair house built by his father, Sir Edward, by adding directly in front of it 'a very goodly gate house of stone ...being one of the fairest pieces of work made of late times, that I have seen in all these countries'. According to his descendant, Sir Thomas Clifford, he did this in about 1580.

Old Tixall Hall itself, which dated from 1555, was a typical mixture of stone and timber-framing, such as might have been built at any time in the previous hundred years. The Gatehouse, on the other hand, was an example of the latest fashion in architecture, being richly decorated with Classical ornament, as learned from the Continent but used with that uninhibited Mannerist exuberance that was unique to England. There is a brave, but not quite textbook, attempt at the Classical orders on each main elevation. In the spandrels above the archway, armed warriors face the outside world while curvaceous ladies thinly disguised as angels watched over the inner courts. The quality of the carving is extremely high.

We have no record of how the Gatehouse was divided inside, nor of its use. Two original fireplaces survive on the first floor, so there must have been at least two rooms here, with closets opening off them in the corner turrets. These may have served as lodgings for guests, or for an important household official such as the Steward. The roof terrace may have served as a platform from which to watch the hunt in the surrounding deer park. The main function of the Gatehouse, however, was simply to impress, to show off the wealth and power of its owner.

The Astons were an old and respected Staffordshire family. They had lived at Haywood since the 1200s, but acquired Tixall by marriage in 1507 and with the building of a new house there it became their home. Under Sir Walter Aston it was also involved in one of the chief historical dramas of the day. Sir Walter, who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth and served her as Sheriff of Staffordshire and Justice of the Peace, was a staunch Protestant, and keen prosecutor of Catholics. As such, his house was a safe choice when, following the discovery of the Babington Plot in September, 1585, it was felt necessary to remove Mary, Queen of Scots from her prison at Chartley for a short time. She spent two weeks at Tixall before returning to Chartley.

Ironically, Sir Walter's grandson, another Walter, became a Catholic himself. He was ambassador to Spain under James I and Charles I, who made him a Baron. He and his son William lived in great style at Tixall. They entertained lavishly and were keen patrons of the arts and literature. But times were still dangerous for Catholics: in 1679 Lord Aston was imprisoned in the Tower of London after being accused of involvement in the Titus Oates conspiracy, a supposed Catholic plot against the life of Charles II which led to the execution of a number of Catholics but turned out to have been largely fabricated by Oates, a clergyman who had pretended to join the Jesuits.

In 1751, the 5th Lord Aston died aged 28, leaving two small daughters. Tixall Hall was left empty for many years and when the younger daughter, Barbara, and her husband, Thomas Clifford, came to live there in 1768, was all but derelict. They pulled down the Tudor house and, while living in a Georgian addition to it, began work on a completely new house. This was built not on the site of

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the old one, however, but further to the east, where its outlook was not blocked by the Gatehouse. As a result, the Gatehouse now became an ornamental building in a park landscaped by Capability Brown and William Emes.

Thomas and Barbara Clifford left Tixall to their eldest son, another Thomas, who was made a baronet in 1815. He completed his parents' work, employing Samuel Wyatt to decorate the new Hall. A scholar and a poet, he also, with his brother Arthur, wrote a history of Tixall. His descriptions of his home of which he was deeply fond, can also be read as a form of epitaph, since in 1821 he inherited another great estate, Burton Constable in Yorkshire. His son, a second Sir Thomas, decided to live there and put Tixall up for sale in 1833. It was bought in 1845 by his neighbour, Lord Talbot of Ingestre.

Lord Talbot let Tixall to a series of tenants. His son, the Earl of Shrewsbury, lived there briefly while Ingestre was rebuilt after a fire in 1882. Thereafter it was once again rented out, or left empty, until in 1927 it was demolished. Just the Gatehouse, and the Cliffords' unusual semi-circular stable block, survive to remind us of a long and interesting history.

The Restoration of the Gatehouse

The Gatehouse has been little more than a picturesque ruin since the 18th century. Repairs to the stonework were carried out by a local mason, Richard Trubshaw of Great Haywood, in 1721. Sir Thomas Clifford may have given it a new roof a century later, but by then it had long been uninhabitable. This roof, in turn, fell in during the 1950s. Some work to stabilise the Gatehouse as a ruin was carried out in 1960, but this could only be a temporary solution - buildings seldom survive intact for long as roofless shells, under attack inside and out from the elements. It was thus with some relief that the Shrewsbury estate greeted Landmark's offer to take it on in 1968.

It took some years to raise funds to pay for the restoration, and to draw up plans and have them agreed by the relevant authorities, but work finally began in 1975. The architect was Lawrence Bond, who was working on the conversion of the Stables at the same time. The work was divided into two distinct parts: the repairs, mainly to the eroded exterior stonework and the creation of a new dwelling inside.

For the stonework repairs, a local mason, Mr Walker, was employed. The work took him two years and was carried out with immense skill. As little as possible of the old work was renewed. The original stone came from a quarry nearby, long overgrown. Luckily, some large blocks had been used to close ground floor windows in the last century. These were now reopened, so Mr Walker was able to salvage this surplus stone for sections where decay, or damage from the rusted iron cramps of earlier repairs, made renewal unavoidable. All new stonework is fixed with bronze, and resin. Meanwhile new floor and roof structures of steel and concrete had been inserted into old beam pockets in the walls enabling them to be placed at the correct height. The new roof was paved in York stone, to give a durable surface.

This being the time of Dutch Elm disease, elm was used for new floorboards and panelling. New doors were hung on old hinge pins, and 95 new iron casements were made, with 223 glazed and leaded lights.

The restoration was completed in 1977 with the renewal of gilded weather vanes on the turrets. One turret had contained a faceless clock, whose workings were also renewed, but whose original bell still strikes the passing hours.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Tixall Gatehouse sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.