

The Landmark Trust

WILMINGTON PRIORY, NR. EASTBOURNE, EAST SUSSEX

As an alien priory Wilmington is an unusual type of monastic building. Alien priories were religious institutions, run by local incumbents, but dependent on parent houses, which were mostly situated in Normandy. As such they were viewed with suspicion during the frequent wars with France during the Middle Ages, and they were finally suppressed by Henry V in 1414. The Priory at Wilmington was a cell of the Benedictine Abbey of Notre-Dame de Grestain situated near the mouth of the Seine. It had been founded by Herluin de Conteville and his wife Arlette, the mother of William of Conqueror, lending it considerable prestige.

As it was so conveniently situated for the journey to Normandy, Wilmington Priory became Grestain Abbey's base for managing its extensive English estates. It was never a conventional Priory with cloister and chapter-house, but rather at the height of its fortunes it seems to have housed the Prior and perhaps two or three monks; their chief duties were those of a land agent. At the centre of the Priory today is an open space which is the site of the hall with its early 13th-century entrance which still survives. The hall received additions in the form of a wing to the south-east, a two-storey porch, a drum tower, a wing to the north-east with an undercroft, and possibly after the suppression, a great chamber, which replaced the western service wing.

After it was suppressed the Priory came into the hands of the Dean and Chapter of Chichester Cathedral and in 1565 it was granted to Sir Richard Sackville. Quite remarkably, from then until 1925, the Priory was never sold but passed by marriage from the Sackvilles to the Comptons and then to the Cavendishes. Wilmington eventually passed to the 9th Duke of Devonshire and it was he who presented it along with the Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1925.

The Archaeological Society's architect, Walter Godfrey of Wratten and Godfrey carried out repairs and opened up much of the Priory as well as creating quarters for a custodian in the south-east wing. A museum of rural life was set up much later in the present kitchen, the large room above and in the porch chamber. By the beginning of the 1990s this arrangement was no longer viable and so the Sussex Archaeological Society asked the Landmark Trust to take on the priory.

As our architect we chose Ian Angus who is a partner in Walter Godfrey's firm now known as Carden & Godfrey, thus keeping this historical link. Wilmington Priory is one of the most archaeologically complicated buildings with which the Landmark Trust has ever been involved. Alterations have taken place in almost every century since its foundation, and the result is a complex puzzle to try and unravel.

The Landmark Trust was not able to commence repairs until 1999, and then only thanks to support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, several charitable trusts, and the many donors who responded to our appeal.

The restoration work was carried out by Quadric Ltd of Eastbourne, who had recently finished work on nearby Michelham Priory, also owned by the Sussex Archaeological Society.

A TOUR OF THE BUILDING WITH RESTORATION NOTES

Exterior

The entire **roof** of the Priory was completely stripped, repaired and recovered during restoration. The timbers were found to be nailed together rather than jointed. The salvaged tiles have been used up on the south side with the northern side, hips and ridges being roofed with new Keymer tiles from the nearby village of Ringmer. The roof slopes are very uneven and the pitch varies which made this job extremely challenging.

Standing at the front door looking north towards the church, the open space on the left is the site of the earliest part of Wilmington Priory, the old hall built around 1225. This would have been a single storey room open to the roof. To the left of the archway into the porch is the remains of one of its windows in what was then an outside wall. The decorated doorway into the porch with its columns and capitals was originally the entrance into the hall. The area north of the old hall was an additional wing built c1400 with a vaulted undercroft below which can be entered via the steps from the garden.

The porch was a later addition to the hall and was built c1330. The window in its south wall was at this time the original entrance to the Priory. Surprisingly, the fine vaulting above, with its mask bosses, was added later and you can see how it cuts across the entrance arch. From here you would have entered the hall and on the left would have been the service wing. Today this site is occupied by the ruins of the great chamber added c1450. At the same time the entrance to the porch was fortified by the addition of a portcullis.

On the **south and west faces** of the main house in the south-east wing, cement-based render was removed and replaced with a lime-based one. The garden path from the lane had been raised over the years and so we have removed some steps and made a gentle slope downwards, which has improved its appearance. The ruined parts of the Priory have been consolidated and the wall heads protected.

Part of the Priory's undercroft can be explored: the entrance is opposite the entrance gate as you enter the grounds.

Interior

The **hallway** is part of the south east wing which originated around 1225 at the same time as the monastic hall or very soon afterwards. This wing would have provided fine lodgings for the prior and his guests on the upper floor, whilst the ground floor rooms, which would have had lower ceilings than they do now, served as store rooms. However, it now has much more of the character of an 18th-century farmhouse. This wing originally extended further east towards the road, but it was truncated c1450.

The **bathroom to the left of the front door** was the museum custodian's kitchen when Land mark took the site on, and the fireplace from this phase has been left. A door used to connect through to the sitting room: this has been blocked but can still be read.

The **sitting room** has an 18th-century appearance due to its window joinery and shutters but the marble fireplace is Victorian. The fireplace was leaning away from the wall and its iron cramps had rusted. The soot accretions of many years were removed, carefully cleaned away with a wet snakestone. As this part of the building has the atmosphere of a plain farmhouse, the floor boards are stained black and the walls have been distempered.

Today's **kitchen** is a room added in the 17th century. By this time, the monastic hall that this room was added to was long since derelict and the north wall of the kitchen extended beyond the present one so that the massive fireplace stood in the middle of the wall. The main work here is the new north wall, which is intended as an unmistakably modern intervention, improving the room's appearance and letting in more light. It allows you to imagine how the kitchen extended north, with the fireplace then central to the room. We removed a pier that had been inserted into the fireplace in about 1895 probably to take a range.

Archaeological investigation of the kitchen floor revealed footings of no fewer than three 'south' walls with the present one the furthest away from the courtyard. A new floor was laid using bricks made locally at Godstone. They are laid on sand without a sub-base or damp proof course so as not to interfere with the archaeology. The ceiling has been strengthened and the walls limewashed.

Upstairs is the **mezzanine landing** under a lean-to roof added by Walter Godfrey after 1925 to accommodate the custodian's bathroom, removed as part of the restoration to make the staircase and landing airy and spacious. Passing the next short flight of stairs to the next landing there is a **bedroom** on your left.

Straight ahead is another, **the chapel bedroom**. In the 13th century this would have been a chapel for the prior's private use. The medieval roof timbers contrast with the Georgian sash windows and their shutters. There was much debate about how to present this room. Until the 18th century there was a wall (as there is now) between the space where there is now a shower room and the bedroom itself. When the room was given its Georgian windows, this wall was removed, and by 1851 a lower ceiling had been put in which obscured the roof timbers. By putting back the wall, the roof is once more revealed, and a useful shower room with a new roof light been created in a space where there is nothing to reveal or protect. Landmark plastered around and painted over the lesser timbers and the plasterer has left his motif - a Tudor rose - in the top west corner of the ceiling. Below the tie beams of the later 18th-century ceiling, most is Georgian; above it, most is medieval.

David Martin, our archaeologist, discovered the remains of a lancet window in the splay of the south-east window which can be seen by opening the tiny door inside the left shutter housing. As we believe that this room was a first floor chapel with the floor three feet lower than today, it is likely that there would also be the remains of a piscine (a washing basin for communion vessels) within the 13th-century lancet.

Returning to the mezzanine you pass through into the **room over the kitchen**. This, like the kitchen below, was also one of the main museum rooms and we have deliberately left it unconverted. From here a few steps lead up to the **chamber over the porch** which contains the remains of a decorative 14th-century window and would have been a high status room, originally reached from the great chamber opposite. We thought at length how to treat the east window as the main sash window to the south gives the room an 18th-century feel. By making a lobby, we have created a linen cupboard in the corner and it also makes an excellent platform from which to spot the crown-post roof above the small bedroom and shower room.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for self-catering holidays. Wilmington Priory sleeps up to 6 people and anyone can stay here. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk