

The Landmark Trust

THE BATH TOWER, CAERNARFON, GWYNEDD

In the Welsh classic, the Mabinogian, Maccsin Wledig has a dream in which he "could see a great castle, the fairest that mortal had ever seen". In reality Maccsin Wledig was the Roman Emperor Magnus Maximus who ruled for a few years after 383 AD. He married Elen, a British princess. As part of her maiden fee she demanded three strongholds - "And she chose that the most exalted stronghold should be made for her in Arfon, and soil from Rome was brought there so that it might be healthier for the Emperor to sleep and sit and move about".

When Edward I came to build his castle at Caernarfon in the late 13th century he would have been aware of this legend which establishes the city as the seat of Imperial power in the Welsh imagination. So instead of a castle of simple limewashed rubble walls like Conway or Harlech, Edward commanded his Master of the King's Works, James of St George, to design "a great castle (with) many great towers of various colours". The polygonal towers and the bands of different coloured dressed stone were intended to recall the image of Constantinople. By invoking these legends Edward intended to establish his own centre of government in Wales as a direct and legitimate successor to the ancient Imperial power, and at the same time use this authority to impress his rulership indelibly on the minds of the conquered people.

The town walls were built at the same time as the castle and most of the masonry was complete by 1285, although significant work was required only ten years later after parts had been "thrown down" by the Welsh. The walls now stand practically as built, with only a few later openings and alterations to the towers. There are two main twin-towered gateways, and eight bastions - half towers originally open at the back. The encircling wall-walk would have been carried over on bridges. This survival of the walls is remarkable and is due at least in part to the poverty of Caernarfon in the 17th and 18th centuries which meant that it did not need to expand through or over them.

In about 1800 the Corporation set about renovating their dilapidated town. Some new gates were pierced through the walls, including the church gate, and St Mary's church was rebuilt. During the 19th century, with the great expansion of population caused by the slate industry, houses were built against the walls, inside and out, so that they almost disappeared from view. In the 20th century many of these buildings were cleared to leave open space around the outside, and in places, inside as well. The result is one of the most complete survivals of a fortified medieval borough in Europe.

When Speed produced his map of Caernarfon in 1610, Bath Tower was still in its original open state backing onto what looks like a formal garden, the grounds of a famous mansion called Plas Isaf. This house had gone by the end of the 18th century, and its grounds continued as an open space until the Marquis of Anglesey built a Public Bath House in 1823 to help attract tourists. It is from this that the tower gets its name. This establishment was described as "replete with every accommodation - hot, cold and shower baths, supplied with sea water by an engine, and furnished with every requisite appendage". It also included a news room, museum, billiard room and concert room/theatre.

However the success of the Baths must have been limited because in 1856 they were obtained by the Bishops of Bangor and St Asaph for use by the North Wales Training College. Bath Tower had probably already been enclosed and annexed to the Baths by this time, the upper room with its large windows and fine views perhaps being used as a reading or writing room for its patrons. The College used the Tower as a pantry for such purposes as cleaning knives and shoes. In 1871 the upper room was adapted by the College for use as a chapel and the stained glass was inserted.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

Ten years later there was a serious fire and the College moved to Bangor. The Baths now become the first County School in Wales opening in 1894. The Bishops sold Bath Tower separately to a surgeon, John Williams who converted it into a dwelling. Unfortunately he died a year later, but his wife lived on until 1907.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The Bath Tower was one of Landmark's earliest restorations, bought from John Williams' descendants in 1967. It had been empty for some time, and on inspection by our architect, L Beddall Smith, was found to be suffering from subsidence. The wall on the quay side was leaning so severely that at the top it was 18" out of true! Underneath the Tower was a cavity big enough for a man to crouch in. To stabilise the whole building and provide firm foundations, cement was grouted in to a depth of twenty feet. All this meant that the floor to the dungeon had to be taken up and it was decided to relay it with slate slabs instead of the red quarry tiles it had had before. The entrance from the back at ground floor level was replaced with a window.

On the next two floors the fireplaces were taken out and the masonry cleaned and re-pointed. On the first floor, a bathroom was removed to leave the actual bastion as one space - now the 'dormitory'.

The same was achieved on the second floor by fitting all the services into the Victorian part at the back. This necessitated the removal of the staircase from the north to the south side. A kitchen which was in an adjoining building stuck onto the north side was removed and replaced by the terrace. New oak boards were laid in the sitting room.

On the top floor the pitched roof was very unsatisfactory and leaked badly, so that it and the chimneys were removed. The slates were later used for the roof of another Landmark - Ty Coch at Rhiwddolion, near Betws-y-coed. The flat roof which replaced it not only formed a terrace, but also gave enough room to build the top bedroom without it showing above the battlements. The battlements were partly rebuilt with new stone copings instead of the previous cement ones.

Since the original work was done in 1967, improvements were carried out in 1997 when a wood burning stove was added to the sitting room, and all the previously bare stone walls limewashed, resulting in a warmer and lighter building. An oak screen has also been introduced to the dormitory to separate it from the basement stairs. Of the bastion towers that were turned into dwellings in the 18th or 19th centuries, Bath Tower is now the only one that remains so, which makes it more than just a curiosity and gives it an importance beyond that of its own charm and situation. It is vital that it should not only be preserved, but properly lived in and enjoyed.

In 2008 the roof was re-lined to address the problem of water seepage into the outer walls. Further works were carried out during spring 2010 to re-point the external stone work which we hope over time will reduce the water stains on the limewashed walls of the sitting room.

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