

# The Landmark Trust

## LUTTRELL'S TOWER, EAGLEHURST, SOUTHAMPTON

Luttrell's Tower was built in around 1780 for Temple Simon Luttrell, owner of the Eaglehurst Estate at that time. For a long time on stylistic grounds, the tower's architect was thought to be James Wyatt. However, in 1990 Roger White of the Georgian Group recognised the tower in a drawing at Vassar Art Gallery in New York State, by architect Thomas Sandby. Thomas, whose brother was the better known Paul Sandby, designed few buildings. Comparison of the drawing with Luttrell's Tower proved the tower to be by Thomas Sandby, the only one of his buildings known to survive. It is built in the so-called Gothick style, made fashionable by Horace Walpole's house at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, a whimsical harking back to the forms of the Middle Ages.

In the eighteenth century, the tower was known both as Eaglehurst, after the estate on which it stood, and Luttrell's Folly, for it belongs to that class of buildings that are built more for fun than serious intent. This tower, however, was more substantial than most follies, since it contained bedrooms and kitchens as well as a fine top floor with views across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. It seems even then it was used as a retreat for the family. An account written in 1790 tells us that 'Several subterraneous passages lead from the area to a number of marquees, to which the family retires when the turbulence of the weather renders a residence in the house disagreeable. In these tents there are several beds, and also a kitchen. The house being small, these retreats are both cool and agreeable. At their backs stands a yew hedge, which protects them from the severity of the north and north-west winds. From hence another passage leads to a bathing house on the beach. All these retreats are well bricked and floored: but so very wet at times that they are impassable'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>J Hassall, *Tour of the Isle of Wight* (1790)

Temple Simon Luttrell belonged to a colourful and well-connected Irish family. His father, Simon Temple Luttrell, was created Earl of Carhampton in 1785. Temple Simon Luttrell had two notorious sisters, Anne and Elizabeth. Anne married George IV's younger brother, the foolish Duke of Cumberland, who employed Thomas Sandby as his deputy for his own role as Ranger of Windsor Park, which may have been how the commission at Eaglehurst came about. Elizabeth 'played high and cheated much', which was no doubt what led her to be imprisoned in a debtors prison and convicted as a pickpocket in Bavaria. Temple Simon Luttrell had quite an eventful life himself, including being arrested by revolutionaries in Boulogne in 1793, who exhibited him as the captured brother of the King of England. We do not know for sure why he built the folly. Local tradition claims he built it for smuggling, with its underground tunnel to the beach. Graffiti in the tunnel suggests it may predate the tower, so perhaps there was earlier smuggling activity here. Certainly, smuggling was rife along this part of the coast in the eighteenth century, but there is no firm evidence that our Luttrell was a smuggler.

After Luttrell's death in 1803, the tower came into the ownership of the 7th Earl of Cavan, a distinguished soldier in the Napoleonic Wars and commander of the British army in Egypt. It was he who brought back the enormous pair of feet at the top of the steps down to the beach, though to be the base of a statue of Ramses II of the XIXth dynasty, perhaps brought back as ballast in a supply ship. It was Cavan who built the house at Eaglehurst, one of the first houses in England of any size to be built as a bungalow. The future Queen Victoria, visiting when she was fourteen in 1833, was very taken by it. 'They live entirely on the ground floor like tents', she wrote in her Journal. She was also impressed by Lord Cavan's mummy, a piece of whose linen wrapping she was given to keep. Later, as queen, Victoria seriously considered buying the house at Eaglehurst as her seaside residence before finally deciding on Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. In 1844, the 8th Earl sold the estate and tower to a local, Dr Drummond, who bought it to prevent its development as part of the seaside boom. For the next hundred years, the house and tower formed the venues for smart parties thrown by a succession of tenants.

The most famous of these tenants was Guglielmo Marconi, pioneer of radio, who rented the tower from 1911 to 1916 because it was conveniently close to another station near the Needles. He used the top room of the tower as a radio laboratory and would disappear there for hours. His daughter recalled that the family dog once bit him as a stranger. She also recalled climbing to the very top of the tower with her mother, to wave a red scarf to the Titanic as she sailed from Southampton, on her doomed first and only voyage.

The next tenants, Sir Guy and Lady Granet, commissioned architect Clough Williams-Ellis (who built Portmeirion in North Wales) to design the steps from the tower down to the beach. As Williams-Ellis also recalled in a letter in 1975, he 'had the fun of restoring & embellishing the Gothick tower folly & surroundings & contriving a "perspective" garden etc.' During the Second World War, the RAF requisitioned the Tower as a lookout, removing its white flag pole as too conspicuous to the enemy. After the war, the tower was bought by Colonel Gates (of Cow & Gate) who repaired it and made some minor alterations. In 1965, he made the tower habitable year round by installing a modern bathroom and kitchen, laying wooden floors and replacing all the chimney pieces except that on the ground floor. The cellar was plastered and painted, the wine bins built, the sea tunnel re-opened and the iron gates re-hung. The top room, which Marconi had used, was restored: the plasterwork was re-done and the shell frieze put back with new shells and the room became Colonel Gates's bedroom.

After all this work, relatively little needed to be done by the Landmark Trust when we acquired the tower in 1968 (the main house and gardens are privately owned). Under architect Philip Jebb's direction, the tower's bathroom was made to exit onto the stairs rather than through the first floor bedroom and a new loo was constructed off the stairs. A new kitchen was put in on the top floor, where there had been an en suite bathroom to the Colonel bedroom, and the sitting room was moved from the ground floor to this top floor. The front door was moved back to the bottom of the stair turret, having been replaced earlier by French windows into the garden from the ground floor room.

Luttrell's Tower's exposed position by the sea makes it a difficult and expensive building to maintain and it requires close and regular attention. A major repair and refurbishment campaign was carried out in 2003/4, giving greater emphasis to the tower's Georgian origins in its decoration. In 2010, new, specially designed wrought iron gates were installed leading down to the beach. Luttrell's Tower continues to be one of the most popular of Landmark buildings and has brought great enjoyment to countless visitors over the decades it has been in Landmark's care.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Luttrell's Tower sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*

