

The Landmark Trust

THE PROSPECT TOWER, NR. FAVERSHAM, KENT

The Prospect Tower was built in 1807-8 for General Harris, who later became Lord Harris of Seringapatam. Its designer is not known, but it is typical of the Picturesque garden buildings illustrated in the architectural pattern books of the day, without which no gentleman's property was complete.

The tower cost £400 to build, and the General referred to it in his accounts as the Gardener's Lodge or General's Whim. The original intention might have been to build an ornamental cottage for a gardener, but it is hard to believe that this plan was ever realised. The pretty upper chamber was clearly meant for the Harris family's own use, and though the plain lower room was at that time self-contained, with its own door, it is too small for a dwelling. Besides which, it had a floor of knapped flint, which would not have made it very comfortable.

Whatever his practical first intentions, the General's fit of whimsy clearly overtook them, and he ended up building what was soon known as the Castle. It served the family as a summerhouse, somewhere to have tea on a June day, while enjoying the outlook over the countryside. An elderly cousin who lived with the family at Belmont noted one day in her diary that they had a syllabub there.

The tower also served as the focal point for a new garden laid out by the General. He had bought Belmont Park in 1801, having returned from service in India the year before. There he had been Commander in Chief of the army that defeated Tipoo Sultan, ruler of Mysore, at Seringapatam, thus establishing British rule in Southern India. The prize money from this campaign was immense, amounting to £112,000, and this, with other savings, enabled the General to retire from the army, and set himself up as a country gentleman. After looking at a number of properties, he bought Belmont, with gardens, park and a farm held on lease from Oriel College, Oxford, 265 acres of land in all, for £8,960.

To begin with, the General was busy making improvements to the house and farm, but he soon turned his attention to the gardens. Here again, the practical things came first: peach and grape houses, pineapple and melon pits, and new walls, all appear in the accounts from 1805. At the same time he was drawing up plans for extending the Pleasure Grounds. A park and shrubberies already existed to the south and east of the house, but the General planned to make a new garden west of what was still a public road called Abraham Street. The line of Walnut Tree Walk is pencilled in on an estate map of about 1803, running through an orchard, past a wood called Nightingale Grove. The completed scheme is shown on another map of 1812.

This new walk was a favourite of the General's, and he spent much of his old age pottering up and down it. Already planted with walnuts, there were in fact two paths, one grass, the other smooth gravel "after McAdam's plan". Between them was a wide quickset hedge, in which he had cut arbours, with seats. At the end was the tower, with ivy growing on its walls to give a genuine air of Antiquity.

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The 2nd and 3rd Lords Harris spent much of their time abroad on public duty, and the tower was probably seldom visited. However, after 1870 it was given a new lease of life. When he succeeded his father in 1872, the 4th Lord Harris had already earned a name for himself as a cricketer. He made a cricket ground in the field next to the Prospect Tower and the Belmont Eleven was soon taking on other county teams. Until the 1920s, when Lord Harris was forced by age to retire from the game, cricket was a regular feature of Belmont summer life. The tower served as a pavilion, with hooks for the gear fixed to the walls. The studs on the players' shoes pitted the floorboards of the upper room, and one distinguished visitor signed his name on the plaster.

THE REPAIR OF THE TOWER

In 1990, the Prospect Tower was leased to the Landmark Trust, a charity which specialises in the repair of small historic buildings. Once repaired, these buildings are let for short breaks, which provides an income for their future upkeep, and allows a wide variety of people to live in them and enjoy them for periods ranging from a weekend to three weeks.

The conversion of this very small tower to provide accommodation for even two people called for some ingenuity on the part of the architects, Messrs Benson and Bryant, and the builders, W. W. Martin of Ramsgate. This was achieved by making a new door between the ground floor room and the staircase, while at the same time blocking the outside door to this room. It then became possible to put a shower room in the original entrance lobby. There was just space to fit a kitchen into the corresponding alcove above. Water and electricity both had to be specially laid on, with all wires buried underground for obvious visual reasons.

Before this, extensive repairs were needed. The tower had been unused for many years, and it had nearly lost its roof in the gales of October 1987. There were some ominous cracks in the walls. These had to be stitched with metal ties, and two sections of parapet, with the wall below, completely rebuilt. The roof was renewed at the same time, on both main tower and turrets.

Inside, floors and ceilings all had to be renewed. Surviving sections of the decorative cornice and central rose in the sitting room were carefully taken down and copied, to make up missing areas, before being reset. New floorboards were laid, although some of the old, stud-pitted, boards were retained in the middle of the room. When repairing the stairs, the section of wall with Sir Leary Constantine's signature had sadly to be taken down. It is now preserved in a specially made ash box. The windows were repaired, keeping the old sashes where possible, and most of the old glass. On the ground floor the existing brick floor was relaid, but with new underfloor heating beneath it.

The walls throughout the tower are finished in traditional lime-hair plaster, and painted with special porous paints, coloured with natural pigments. The building is thus able to breathe, and any damp in the walls evaporates quickly, without causing problems.

After minor landscaping works, the tower was ready to receive its first visitors in the spring of 1992. One detail remained to be added: the weathervane of a cricketer, based on a portrait of Lord Harris.

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