

The Landmark Trust

THE TOWER, CANON'S ASHBY, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

The tower at Canons Ashby has stood for five centuries. From its Elizabethan origins (c. 1560) to 1981 the house and its tower were in the custody of generations of the Dryden family. Many of them were content to preserve the site's way of life without disturbing its origins: others repaired its structure or remodelled certain aspects. Charles Latham, writing for *Country Life* in the 1900s described Canons Ashby as 'unmodernised and unsmartened... breath[ing] the spirit of antiquity.' Thirty years later the Northamptonshire architect and historian John Gotch noted how time seemed to stand still at Canons Ashby; entering its portals was to be transported back two hundred years. This aspect of a time-capsule was to prove Canons Ashby's greatest asset and also its greatest burden. By 1937 the current generation of Drydens was living in Zimbabwe; the house was rented out and rapidly descending into an irreparable state of decay. For many years the National Trust and others had been acutely aware of its deteriorating condition. When the family advertised for a new tenant, Gervase Jackson-Stops, as Architectural Advisor to the National Trust, knew the time had come to make a bid to save this unique piece of Elizabethan history, poetically described by Gotch as 'less than a palace...and more than a manor-house.'

Various events then came together most fortuitously. In 1980, the Dryden family generously donated the house, lands and church to the National Trust. The Trust was of course delighted, but similarly aware that without the necessary funds for repairs and endowment they would be unable to accept the gift. The newly established National Heritage Memorial Fund was persuaded to give half its allocation for the entire year (£1.5 million) to this relatively unknown property, as the basis of a restoration package. The building rapidly became a cause célèbre amongst country houses. Other donors stepped in: the Landmark Trust, the Department of the Environment and the Historic Buildings Trust. For Landmark this was a new partnership, a joint venture drawn up in 1983 with the National Trust. Landmark's founder John Smith made a sizeable donation to the Trust's restoration appeal for Canon's Ashby from his Manifold Trust, and in return Landmark was granted a lease for the tower to use and maintain as a holiday let.

The task however was immense. The estate was a wilderness of dead trees; the house was riddled with death-watch beetle, roofs were unsound, walls bowing and the tower extremely unstable. The southern elevation, divided by the tower, was a particularly serious problem. Scaffolding had to be erected with incredible care; so fragile was the south wall that the slightest pressure could have brought it down. Later when a chute for the ancient garderobe (a medieval latrine) in the tower was discovered, the intended system of lightweight concrete beams, designed to hold up the tower, had to be radically revised to protect the chute. At peak times a team of over thirty craftsmen worked on the restoration, some completing their apprenticeships within the building period. Canons Ashby opened to the public in April 1984. It was hailed as a triumph of restoration at a time when many country houses were being lost and others stood in great peril. Canon's Ashby set an important precedent, described by historian and campaigner John Cornforth at the time as 'arguably the most encouraging individual preservation package to have been worked out for a number of years.'

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

The tower contains the secrets of Elizabethan construction techniques and design influences; the first two floors of the tower are timber-framed and predate the upper floors, which are constructed of local stone and brick. The development of window design during the period can also be read in the tower. Predominant are the arched Tudor window lights, with hood mouldings, which were common at the time of Henry VIII (1509-47). The tower also has examples of mullion windows with flat headers, without such arches, which became more popular as the 16th century progressed, although both were commonly used throughout the period. The one definitive change in style is the classical door-case to the tower, part of the programme of 'modernisation' (1708-10) of Edward Dryden (d.1717), which shows the shift in taste towards classicism in the early eighteenth century. 17th- and 18th-century inventories and the detailed drawings of the nineteenth-century antiquary Sir Henry Dryden (1818-99) also illuminate the tower's history. Henry Dryden's highly accomplished architectural drawings are held by the Northamptonshire Record Office, and were used extensively in the restoration of the house. Until the 19th century it appears the tower at Canons Ashby was used for sleeping accommodation – a piece of 18th-century children's drawing is still preserved on its walls.

The tower also can be read as history of the Dryden family itself. Its early origins connect to the history of the 16th-century Dryden family, who inherited a farmhouse on the site, which was subsequently remodelled. It is very unusual for a Northamptonshire house of this period to have a tower placed within an elevation; more normally in Elizabethan architecture a tower would be incorporated into an entrance gate or as a corner addition. Gotch recounts how in the 16th century John Dryden (d. 1584) came from Cumberland to marry a daughter of Sir John Cope, who, shortly after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536, acquired the lands at Canons Ashby formerly belonging to the Black Canons of the order of St Augustine. John Dryden inherited through his wife an L-shaped farmhouse (the present entrance range) which he gradually extended in a clockwise direction adding the staircase tower and south-west block. Architectural historians have suggested that it is this Cumbrian connection of the Dryden's which is responsible for the nature of the tower. Its design is remarkably similar to the 'pele' towers, built on the Cumbrian and Scottish borders to repel invaders. Such towers were originally freestanding and were often later enlarged to incorporate wings and extensions. Certainly, the exterior of Canon's Ashby tower shows no traces of the newly fashionable Renaissance classicism; instead it follows the Tudor Gothic typical of the majority of English buildings during the sixteenth century.

Destined to become pivotal to the evolution of this important Elizabethan courtyard house, the tower is a special and important piece of architectural history. Its fortune has waxed and waned during the centuries; by the 1880s a tree was recorded as growing out of its structure. Since the 1980s, visitors to the tower have the rather special experience of staying in a Landmark property that is also part of a National Trust house, one of the most romantic places in a county renowned for splendid houses.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Tower, Canon's Ashby sleeps up to 2 people.

To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk