

The Landmark Trust

WHITEFORD TEMPLE, NEAR CALLINGTON, CORNWALL

The Duchy of Cornwall very generously gave the Whiteford Temple to the Landmark Trust in 1984. It was originally a summer-house or folly for Sir John Call's Whiteford House at the foot of the hill, which was built in 1775 after his return from India as a wealthy man. We do not know the date of the Temple itself; on one of the Coade-stone panels on the front is the date 1799, but Baring-Gould in his biography of Sir John in 'Cornish Characters and Strange Events' says that Sir John lost his sight in 1795 and he would have been unlikely, after that, to put up a building the main point of which is the view to be enjoyed from it. It is possible that the Temple was built some years before and the panels were added to it later.

Coade stone was a fired artificial stone produced and marketed prolifically in the late-18th and early-19th centuries by Mrs Eleanor Coade from her manufactory in Lambeth. Its durability against frost and rain, and the fine modellers she employed ensured Coade stone's popularity in buildings and landscapes across the country, and it was used in some form by all the best-known architects of the period.

The left hand plaque on the Temple, which has India and America inscribed on it, clearly refers in some way to Sir John's career, perhaps depicting a goddess of conquest or exploration. Tradition says that the Temple was built to celebrate the coming of age of Sir John's eldest surviving son, William; a fete was held, and there was dancing. The panel on the right, with its harvest goddess, refers to the season of William's birthday at the end of August, but in 1799 he was only eighteen. It may be that a tradition of celebrating his birthday had grown up before that and it certainly lasted into his old age: in 1847 Sir William's niece (he succeeded his father as 2nd Baronet in 1801) recorded in her diary that they spent the evening dancing at the Temple.

There are other unanswered questions concerning the Temple. There is no record of the architect but Alastair Forsyth, who researched the history of Whiteford House, believed the most likely candidate is Philip Stowey, a gentleman architect from Devon who with his partner Thomas Jones drew up designs for Bodmin Gaol under Sir John Call's patronage. It was probably Stowey, too, who enlarged the Manor House at Launcells, paid for by Sir John, and who also, therefore, designed the new reredos in the church there, recorded as being given in gratitude for completing the building work without accident.

Restoration

The Temple came to us in a parlous state and as so often with small and simple buildings, a great deal more work was needed to restore it than was originally thought. The back and sides of the building had not been built with the same care as the ashlar masonry front and needed extensive rebuilding and reinforcement.

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A ring beam round the wall-head was also needed to hold the front to the side walls. New granite coping stones were needed round the sides and back of the building, obtained from a local quarry.

A big consideration in the repair of the Temple was how to withstand the weather in this exposed spot - in a strong wind it can seem as though the whole building is going to take off. Especially large Burlington roof slates were chosen as less likely to be lifted by wind, and the lead flashings are more generous than usual to increase their strength and durability. The frames for the windows in the arched openings are all hardwood, rather than softwood as is usual, and painted to withstand the driving rain.

It would not have been appropriate to enlarge the building but by fitting the kitchen and bathroom into the side wings it was possible to leave the main room uncluttered to live in. There was no need for the rear entrance arch, which would only create drafts, and it was anyway decided to make a new back door leading into the kitchen, so the arch was blocked up and a fireplace inserted in its place. A new floor of oak boards was laid.

All the interior detail is, of course, entirely new. No drawings survived to show how it originally was, but all the new work has been designed in a manner suitable for, and sympathetic to, a provincial architect of the late 18th century.

Sadly, although rumours about its whereabouts have been heard and followed up, the missing head of the Coade stone figure has never been found. Both panels are rather broken and in need of repair but since so little is known about the composition of the material, it was decided to leave them alone for the time being rather than attempt a restoration which might damage them.

The surroundings of the Temple have all the romance of a place which was once great, but which is so no more. Trees which belong in parkland and not in farmland hint at other and different landscapes, as do buildings too grand for their present occupation; the stables and outbuildings of the main house survive, converted to farm use. Beyond them are intriguing remains of the garden layout and of the house itself. Bits of the house have been rebuilt into other houses round about, such as the Duchy Home Farm. But as so often when a house such as Whiteford has disappeared and anything which could be useful has been made use of, the buildings that were put up purely for pleasure and festivity are left, romantic but stranded. If they are caught in time, they can continue indefinitely to serve the purpose for which they were intended.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Whiteford Temple sleeps up to 2 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk