

# The Landmark Trust

## **BROMFIELD PRIORY GATEHOUSE, NR. LUDLOW, SHROPSHIRE**

The history of Bromfield Priory Gatehouse falls into three main periods. The first of these is medieval, and to it belongs most of the lower, stone, part of the building: the arch itself and the sides of the gate passage, and the walls to the left, or north, of it. The walls south of the gate arch are later, but may contain medieval masonry - narrow windows, or loops, in the gate passage show that there were originally rooms both sides of it.

This first gatehouse, possibly of just one storey, guarded the entrance to a small Benedictine priory beside the church of St Mary. There had been a religious community at Bromfield since before the Norman Conquest, which in 1155 became a priory subject to St Peter's Abbey in Gloucester. The gatehouse was not built for another two centuries after that, however: the design of the arch and the loops in the gate passage can be dated roughly to the mid-14th century. It probably replaced an earlier gatehouse. On either side of it there would have been a stone wall or a timber stockade. With this, and with the two rivers (the Onny and the Teme) which join east of the church, forming a narrow promontory between them, the priory site was a very secure one.

Bromfield Priory was dissolved in 1538. Its buildings were acquired by Charles Foxe who turned them into a house for himself. The gatehouse continued to preside over its entrance, and before 1600 it was enlarged by the addition of a timber-framed upper storey. This formed a single large room, the present living room, which was probably reached by an outside stair on the north-east corner. The gatehouse was smaller then than it is now, consisting of just the northern two thirds. Eighteenth century views also show it to have had two windows on the west side, a roof of slightly flatter pitch, and no chimney.

One reason for enlarging the gatehouse was undoubtedly to impress. A fashion for building ornamental gatehouses began in the early Tudor period, and was still going strong among the country gentlemen of Shropshire and neighbouring counties until well after 1600. There was obviously an advantage, too, in having the entrance to your house watched over, even in relatively peaceful days; while a good strong pair of doors could be closed in times of unrest.

At the same time, no one put up a large room intending to leave it empty. The upper room at Bromfield is thought to have served as a courtroom, where the manorial court was held and local disputes settled. Records of the manorial court in Bromfield continue until 1770. If it was indeed held in the gatehouse, its ending would explain why the building was abandoned after that, being shown in a state of picturesque decay by watercolourist of the 1790s.

Then, in 1836, as part of a general round of improvement in the village, the gatehouse was restored and enlarged again, this time to serve as the village school and teacher's cottage. The courtroom became the main schoolroom, reached by a stair at the north end: the low rooms there were tall enough for children's cloakrooms. At the south end, a three storey addition was made, with a classroom on the top floor, and rooms for a teacher below. The oriel window on the west front, the chimney, and the decorative finials on the gables were all added at this time, as were the chimneypiece and cupboards inside, made up from an assortment of Jacobean and later carving.

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](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*

In 1895 the school moved to a new building. The south end became an estate cottage, and the main room became a parish reading and recreation room. Although still used occasionally in the 1970s, the gatehouse was really by then in search of a new use once again. A solution was found when in 1990, the gatehouse was leased by the Plymouth estate to the Landmark Trust, as a charity which specialises in the repair of historic buildings.

### **The Repair of the Gatehouse**

While some repairs had been carried out in the 1970s by the Plymouth estate, more work was needed, particularly on the Elizabethan timber frame, some parts of which were badly decayed. The roof also needed attention. This meant stripping off the tiles to repair the structure beneath, before relaying the tiles. To repair the framing of the walls, the brick panels between the timbers had all to be taken out. New oak was then pieced in, preserving as much of the old wood as possible. We could then have replaced the bricks with lath and plaster, which is what was there originally, but there were several arguments against this, both practical and historical. Not only does brick mean a warmer building, but the gatehouse today owes its character as much to the nineteenth century restoration as to its Elizabethan builder. There seemed little point in winding the clock back to a past which no longer exists.

Inside the gatehouse, some minor alterations were needed to make the building work more easily in its new use. The main room would become the main living room, with bedrooms and bathrooms in the cottage at the south end. However, when the school closed in 1895, the door between the main room and the cottage was blocked up. This was now reopened. At the same time, it was decided that the low rooms at the north end should be left as they were, and would not form part of the accommodation. To make space for a kitchen at the north end of the main room, it was decided to floor over the stair at this end, leaving just a trapdoor in case access was ever needed.

After being redecorated inside, and limewashed outside in the traditional way, the gatehouse was ready for furnishing in March 1993. The work had been supervised by the Shrewsbury architects, Arrol and Snell, and carried out by builders from Herefordshire, L.J. Preece and Son. English Heritage gave a grant for the repairs. While these were in progress, the opportunity was taken to learn a little more about the building. Richard Morriss of the Hereford Archaeology Unit did a brief survey of the building which confirmed the theory that the timber frame of the upper room is sixteenth century in date. It also revealed that the design of its roof trusses is highly unusual - no others like it have been seen in the area. So there is still more to learn in the future.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Bromfield Priory Gatehouse sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*