

LAUGHTON PLACE, NR. LEWES, EAST SUSSEX

The tower we see at Laughton today was built in 1534 by Sir William Pelham. It is all that survives of a house that existed from the 13th century until the 1950s, undergoing many alterations and rebuildings on the way. From 1401 until 1927 Laughton remained in the single ownership of the Pelham family, who owned great estates in Sussex. In the 15th and 16th centuries it was indeed their chief residence, and it bears the emblem that they traditionally used to mark their property: the Pelham Buckle, claimed to have been won by military prowess at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356.

There is evidence that the Pelhams rebuilt the existing moated manor-house at Laughton in the early 15th century, but a century later Sir William Pelham, who had succeeded his father in 1517, clearly thought it in need of further improvement. How much work he actually carried out is now uncertain, but it is likely that his plans, at least, were extensive. And until recently there survived bricks bearing the inscription "lan de grace 1534 fut cest mayso faicte", indicating that he was responsible for more than the addition of the tower and some internal redecoration.

William Pelham belonged to a generation brought up with some knowledge of Renaissance ideas, of which the keenest follower was the young prince himself, later Henry VIII, whose near contemporary William was. It was in Henry's Court circle that the influence of Italy made its first tentative appearance, partly in rivalry with the equally Renaissance monarch, Francois I of France. William Pelham was present at their meeting on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. Through his two marriages he came into further contact with the Court, his second father-in-law being William Sandys, Knight of the Garter and Lord Chamberlain, and patron of Italian craftsmen.

Besides the tower, William seems at least to have rebuilt the forecourt, with a gatehouse and corner building. 17th-century illustrations show a house still very much of medieval type, but with an upper floor over the central hall, and this may have been inserted in 1534. Perhaps there was a porch as well, forming an elegant frontispiece, embellished like the tower with decoratively moulded terracotta, a new material which was itself something of an emblem for Renaissance enthusiasts.

The purpose of the tower again we do not know for certain, but in such marshy surroundings the likelihood is that it was intended to serve as an outlook, both for practical purposes and for pleasure. A number of such outlook towers survive from the 16th century. Its top floor was accessible only from the ground floor by the stair turret. The two middle floors, with the grandest rooms, were reached from the main house, which surrounded it on two sides.

By the end of the 16th century, however, Laughton had ceased to be a house of any importance. In 1580 Sir Thomas Pelham built a new house on higher ground at Halland and the family turned its back on the marshes. During the 17th century, Laughton became a tenanted farmhouse, which it remained for the rest of its existence.

There was still one more chapter to come in Laughton's architectural history. In 1715, Thomas Pelham, Duke of Newcastle, gave Laughton Place Farm to his younger brother Henry. These two were among the great figures of the 18th century, both as politicians (each served as Prime Minister) and architectural patrons: Thomas at Claremont, Henry at Esher Place, where William Kent transformed what remained of the Bishop's Palace into a Gothick mansion. Towards the end of his life, Henry Pelham resolved to do likewise at Laughton. He employed for this a Mr White, a carpenter who had been in charge at Esher, and so had worked under William Kent. He chose to remodel Laughton in a similar Gothick manner.

There is some evidence that Henry Pelham intended to have rooms for his own use at Laughton, but he died before the work was finished, in 1754.

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 new house continued as the home of a tenant farmer, until 1927 when the property was sold. The new owner made repeated attempts to demolish the house, and eventually did so in the 1950s, leaving the tower standing on its own in the marsh.

RESTORATION OF THE TOWER

The demolition of the buildings around the tower in the 1950s and the removal of their support, had caused structural problems, probably there from the beginning, to become much worse. Large cracks opened up in the north and south elevations as the stair turret started to move away from the main building, and the east front bulged in the opposite direction. The large number of openings in the walls did not help, and collapse was probably only prevented by the steel joists of the concrete roof, inserted when the tower was used as an observation post in the Second World War.

It was in this sadly battered condition that Laughton was acquired by the Landmark Trust in 1978. The first work supervised by the architect, John Warren of APP, was therefore the urgent erection of a cradle of scaffolding to hold the tower, while methods of repair were considered. The movement that had caused the cracks had happened some time ago, so it seemed that the best course was to repair the building in its settled position, rather than try to force it back together. Steel ties were inserted at three levels, running in both directions, and later, as part of the general work on the walls, the cracks were stitched up with a mixture new brick and lime mortar. The doors on the south and north elevations were blocked up, to reinforce the walls.

When plaster had been stripped from the walls, inside and out, they were closely examined for evidence of the tower's original appearance. As a result, a number of doors, windows, and fireplaces were discovered, including the terracotta windows in the south wall, the door leading into the present lavatory, and the remaining half of that on the first floor. It was also discovered that the buttresses of the stair turret were "flying", with an open archway at their base. At the top of the tower, enough evidence was found in the parapet of the original crenellations for their reconstruction.

Work then began on the overhaul of the entire building. Decayed pointing was scraped out, worn bricks replaced with new handmade equivalents, new coping stones placed on the steps of the buttresses where they were missing, and the whole repointed. The method and mix for this was copied from a small area of original pointing that had been found inside the blocked buttress arches. The bulge in the east front had caused the pediment to come away from the main wall, allowing the weather to penetrate and damage the brickwork. This was all rebuilt, with a new cornice, coping stones and lead flashing.

The roof and internal floors were renewed completely, and the two new additions, known as The Blisters, added at the back of the building, to provide a space for the bathroom, and to link the second floor to the stair turret. Access to the first floor was provided with a new oak stair rising from the ground floor room. The floorboards of the first floor are also oak.

While all this work was going on, the terracotta was also undergoing repair. In some places, this had fractured into several large pieces; these were fixed back together by inserting glass fibre dowels, and then any gaps filled with epoxy resin coloured with brick dust. Where the material had actually started to crumble, it was impregnated with epoxy, to bind it together. Missing sections, such as a sill or the head of a window, were renewed but left plain.

The window joinery on the east front was repaired, as was the door. All the windows were reglazed. New door and window latches were designed in the form of the Pelham buckle, which also adorns the hand-printed curtains.

Round the exterior, the ground was lowered by several inches, to return it to its original level, and a new path formed. During this work, the footings of earlier houses were discovered. The bridge was also rebuilt, and the moat excavated, under the supervision of archaeologists. In 1981, Laughton was ready to receive its first visitors, after three years work.

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