

The Landmark Trust

LOCK COTTAGE, STOKE POUND, WORCESTERSHIRE

Lock Cottage is a good example of Sir John Smith's core purpose in founding the Landmark Trust in 1965. According to the account of Lock Cottage that John Smith himself wrote for the Landmark Handbook: "Until the nineteen fifties many such handsome, unpretentious buildings served and graced our canal system; but the Transport Commission of that day ruthlessly demolished them by dozens, in spite of everything which I and others had to say. Indeed it was, in particular, the destruction of Thomas Telford's Junction House at Hurlestone on the Shropshire Union canal which maddened us into starting the Landmark Trust."

In the event, it was not until 1991 that Landmark acquired this, its first canal building, and then only after long negotiations over access. Lock Cottage is not one of the most architecturally distinguished of Britain's canal buildings, but it has the qualities of simple good design so strongly represented on the canal system as a whole. What it lacks in architectural distinction the cottage has more than enough of in terms of its site, near the foot of the longest flight of narrow locks in Britain, the Tardebigge Thirty. It was at the top of this flight that the idea of the campaigning Inland Waterways Association was first proposed in 1946, on board the narrow boat *Cressy*, home of the writer Tom Rolt, whose widow Sonia has been involved with Landmark almost since the beginning and still chooses the books for Wales and the West Midlands.

The Worcester and Birmingham canal was built to provide a direct route between the industrial heartland of Birmingham and the Severn at Worcester, cutting 30 miles off the alternative route and avoiding the trickier reaches of the Severn above Worcester. The 1790s saw the first lengths on the Birmingham level completed without too much difficulty, despite long tunnels. The scheme even survived the inflation of the years of war with France which slowed work to a crawl, but took the navigable section of the canal to Tardebigge Old Wharf in 1807. Then, in 1809, with new money and an enthusiastic Committee, the Company embarked on planning the final challenge, the descent to Worcester – a fall of 425 feet in 16 miles.

Construction of this last section actually began in 1812. It was a huge undertaking and work progressed slowly. With 58 locks to construct, as well as reservoirs, bridges, wharfs and warehouses, houses for lock-keepers came low on the Company's agenda. Not until 4th December 1814 was the canal declared officially open and the evidence suggest that the cottage at Stoke Pound was not built until 1816, or even 1818.

A lock cottage had to be roughly in the middle of the length of canal for which a lock keeper was responsible. As a result, each cottage was slightly different, for reasons of site and the land available to the company to build on – this cottage is a particularly good example of how the engineers overcame such difficulties, even faced with a narrow strip above a steep embankment. When first built, this one was smaller than it is now, with just two rooms – the kitchen and present dining room – on the ground floor, and perhaps an attic bedroom above. There was probably always a yard at the west end, and a smaller one at the east end, with a low cellar under it, for coal. Under the west yard was a well, but this may not have been original. Later, an upper floor with two bedrooms was added, using a slightly different coloured brick. The stair was where it is now, but it may have been little more than a ladder at first, leading into the smaller bedroom.

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Some years later again, the house was enlarged at the east end, with a taller cellar, a room above it under a lean-to roof, and a new yard beyond, complete with pigsty and shed. The cellar was equipped with a salting bench, for the pigs at a later stage. The new room, with its own outside door, was a workshop and store, known in canal language as a Hovel. The slot in the back wall, to the left of the window, was to allow ladders or long boat-hooks to be hung on the brackets at the side.

At the same time as the addition at the east end, and in the same mix of red and blue brick, a wash-house was built on at the other end (now the sitting room). The wall in front of the cottage, built to give some protection from flooding, probably belongs to this same phase of general improvement, as perhaps does the paving of the west yard. On its steep site, there was no room for anything more than the two yards beside the cottage. In such cases, it was common for a lock-keeper to have his bit of garden on the other bank.

Finally, perhaps at the turn of the century, a third bedroom was added above the workshop. The last lock-keeper to live here moved in in 1953, and if improvements were made for him, little was done thereafter. The uncertainty surrounding the future of Lock Cottage after the death of the last tenant in 1986 lay not in its rather decayed state but in the lack of any access for a car. The cottage had electricity of sorts, but it had no running water, nor plumbing of any kind. A water main was brought along the track and a septic tank put in the field below – it took three years to negotiate these steps.

Significant structural works were required: neither the wash-house nor the cottage had been built with adequate foundations and were showing signs of movement. New foundations were laid, the yard dug up and the rebuilt outer wall tied to a concrete slab behind. The wash-house was also rebuilt, using a mixture of the old and second hand bricks. The walls of the lower east yard, and its outbuildings, also needed rebuilding. The main roof needed new battens and felt. The surviving tiles were then relaid, all exactly as before. The chimneys were also rebuilt and the roofs of the wash-house and outbuildings had to be renewed entirely.

Cement repointing to the back wall was raked out and the joints repointed with lime mortar. The steps to the cellar were reconstructed, and the cellar door repaired. The windows and doors themselves were repaired where possible, but where they were too decayed, the new work copying the old.

As the two downstairs rooms were very small, the wash-house on the west end became the sitting room. The original idea was to keep the wash-house chimney, with its hearth and copper, but the chimney fell down before we finally bought the cottage, so a new central fireplace was made in the existing main chimney breast. The 1950s kitchen range was falling to pieces and so was replaced. A new window was inserted to light the stairs, once the bathroom had been inserted. Overall, the cottage retains the feel of a simple working man's dwelling.

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