

WORTHAM MANOR, LIFTON, DEVON

Wortham Manor was only recognised as a building of more than ordinary interest after the Second World War, left unnoticed by architectural enthusiasts because of its remote location and reduced status as a farmhouse from the middle of the 18th century. Wortham was finally 'discovered' by the architect Philip Tilden in 1943, who became its owner a few years later, describing it in his autobiography as one of the most beautiful houses of the late-15th century he had ever seen. Helped by two 'most conscientious German prisoners', he spent many months removing later plaster ceilings to expose the exceptional carved oak roof structures that can be seen today.

The origins and development of Wortham remain to this day somewhat unclear. Originally there would have been a typical medieval manor house, with an open hall at its centre and a short wing at its east end containing a solar chamber on the first floor, also with an open roof. The hall range continued to the west with the usual service rooms 'below' the screens passage, which probably had a gallery above providing access to the upper storeys of the porch. The hall itself was entered through the fine north porch with its decorative carving dated to about 1450.

A second phase of remodelling and modernisation probably took place in the early- 16th century. The major alteration was the insertion of a floor into the open hall to create an upper and lower hall. The upper hall was reached by a new newel stair in a turret added onto the back or south wall of the hall. West of the hall, the former service rooms were turned into a parlour with a new ceiling similar in detail to that in the hall. Thereafter there were only minor alterations such as the addition of the panelling and fireplace in the parlour around 1600, and the creation of a farmhouse kitchen in the room to the east of the hall, probably after 1750, together with new ceilings which were to hide the early carpentry for the next two centuries. This simple account is open to debate: others have argued that the central part of Wortham was rebuilt in its existing form in one complete phase soon after 1500. The Dinhams, the presiding family at the time, had business and family contacts in London and the southeast, where such newfangled floorplans were more commonplace by this earlier date.

Originally the house had crenellations on top of the hall wall to distinguish this important centre of the house from the rest. The porch, with its panel or tympanum carved in the intractable local granite by local craftsmen, was clearly intended to be decorative and to herald something grand beyond. The College at Week St Mary, also owned by the Landmark Trust, had a nearly identical outer door, reliably dated to 1506.

The south front presents a less unified appearance. The walls are of different stone and of less high quality, revealing evidence of the manor house that must have existed here for at least a century before the early 16th century. The windows are a mixture dating from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

Repair & Restoration

Philip Tilden's work in the 1940s was so carefully done that it has never been clear exactly what he did. Certainly, the unusual screen now in the hall was built into a wall somewhere

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

else in the house when he moved in. The Tildens left in 1949 and eventually Wortham was sold to the Landmark Trust by Miss Mildred Burgess in 1969.

1970s repairs As originally repaired, the house was converted into three flats – one for Miss Burgess and two for Landmarkers to rent and this configuration continued until 1990, although Landmark made some changes during our initial repairs to the house. South of the old kitchen, the old dairy had been made into a sitting room/parlour, with kitchen, bedroom and bathroom beyond in a former cider house. The loft over the cider house was built up to full height, and given a new roof over it with a hipped gable and three new windows looking south for the flat in the east wing (facing the farmyard). The third flat was west of the hall. Landmark returned the roofs to their original form and appearance, a major undertaking as most of the timber needed renewal. A new stone chimney stack was built for the elegant fireplace in Miss Burgess's sitting room. Others were given stone rather than brick tops, and the chimneys of the main range were given new granite caps based on those shown in a drawing dated 1716. The stone came from field walls being demolished by the Highways Department, and the new slates from the Delabole quarry in North Cornwall. Structural repairs included underpinning the walls. Woodworm, dry rot and death watch beetle all had to be tackled. Damp proof membranes were installed along with underfloor heating to provide a gentle background heat without the danger of drying out the timbers. It was only in 1974 that Wortham emerged from its cocoon of scaffolding, the cost having increased dramatically.

1990 opened as a single Landmark For 15 years Wortham remained divided into its three flats. But the main rooms, seldom visited by the public or used by Landmarkers, had become rather sad and empty places and noise travelled between the flats. So in 1990 it was resolved to reunite the house formally. This was easy to do, with the old farmhouse kitchen taking on once again its former role and most of the rambling room configurations remaining as they were. The panelled room west of the screens passage became a second parlour and the chamber above the great hall remained a rather grand bedroom. Wortham could once again be used much as it always had been, the self-contained life of a small but rich, manor house re-created and understood.

2024 major upgrade By the 2020s, Wortham's heating system was in need of major repairs. The various heating and hot water systems inherited from the 1970s flats, the underfloor heating installed in 1990 and several failing air source heat pumps installed in 2002 all needed replacement, and insulation and draughtproofing desperately needed improving. Putting all this right was an exciting way to improve sustainability and reduce energy consumption, and a new ground source heat system was installed running off six boreholes in the paddock to the west of the house. Measures to ameliorate damp penetration, especially in the west gable, were undertaken and will be monitored for success. It was also an opportunity to improve bathroom provision and generally rationalise the room disposition, while at the same time increasing fire safety routes. The chamber above the great hall became the main sitting room, with the panelled room behind the screens passage now becoming a bedroom. Bathrooms were upgrade throughout. On the first floor of the south wing, bedroom privacy and exit routes were improve.

These were major and expensive works (the Landmark was closed for months) made possible only by unrestricted funding from our supporters generous legacies and carefully accumulated maintenance budgets; thanks to this, Wortham Manor is now reinvigorated once more for the 21st century.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Wortham Manor sleeps up to 15 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.