

LAUGHTON PLACE, NEAR LEWES

By John Warren and Charlotte Haslam

The Landmark Trust is a charity dedicated to restoring the smaller neglected building, usually as a holiday home. The buildings in which the Trust invests its efforts are remarkable either for their situation, their history or their architectural qualities. Laughton Place qualifies in every sense.

When members of the Ancient Monuments Society inspected the building during restoration, they saw a curiously gaunt brick tower, some 60 ft. in height, standing in ungainly isolation in a moated site on the flat lands which until recently were marshes. Clouds piled high to the west, over Lewes, and the long dark line of whale-backed Downs cut a grey silhouette across the southern horizon. The tower itself was shrouded in a complex web of scaffolding, and proved on inspection to consist of four super-imposed rooms and a turret containing a magnificent brick spiral stair.

The singular aspect of the tower today gives an entirely false impression of its origins. More than anything else, it now looks like a late mediaeval church shorn of its nave: and in a sense this is what it is. The 'lost nave' was probably a hall-house on the late mediaeval plan against the solar end of which there was built a great four-storey tower with gabled extensions that rose nearly as high as the tower itself. Eventually the house was re-modelled and tricked out with 18th century Gothic refinements. The tower then became the centre-piece of the great front, carrying a central pediment with false pointed-headed windows, and so it survived into the 20th century, being significant enough to be described in detail in Lady Wolseley's book *Some of the Smaller Manor Houses of Sussex*. (London 1925). It was one of the many significant houses that suffered abuse during the Second World War, by which time it was already in poor repair. By some curious irony, one war-time act saved the tower itself. Its height in the lonely flat-lands caused it to be used by the Home Guard or the Army as a look-out, and for this purpose the decaying timbers on the roof were replaced with light steel joists and concrete. The strength of this roof held the top of the tower together and prevented the major fissures in the walls from reaching the parapets. It was only after the War that the rest of the house was taken down, leaving the massive tower standing stark and in unintended isolation. At some earlier, unrecorded, time the contemporary buildings on the east side of the site were demolished, leaving no trace other than foundations along the wall of the moat and one gable wall built into a later farm building.

The tower was built by Sir William Pelham in the year 1534, as is recorded on the building itself, but it remained the principal residence of the family for only two generations, although staying

within their ownership until 1927. As a secondary or tertiary interest, it received little attention and little investment, and the tower itself is probably the only monumental building to have been constructed here. Laughton had been a manor before the Conquest, held by Earl Godwin. By the 13th century, it was part of the Honour which included Pevensey Castle and was attached automatically to the office of Constable of Pevensey. Its ownership by the Pelham family was gradual, by way of tenure, and it was not until 1401 that it passed firmly into the heritage of Sir John Pelham and so to the family. The manor house would in all probability have been timber-framed and may not have stood on the present site, though if not, it was close by. Channels through the undrained marshes gave access to the Ouse and so to the English Channel, but the miasmal site did not hold its attractions and the prime residence was moved a short distance inland, to Halland. Some of the materials from Laughton were carried to Halland and survive in the present farmhouse.

The 18th century prosperity of the Pelham family brought modest waves of investment to lap gently against Laughton Place and the Gothick re-modelling which took place shortly before 1750 may well have been influenced by the architect William Kent, who had been working for Henry Pelham at Esher Place. The subsequent history is of repairs and demolitions, and it is likely that the ground-heave of later demolitions, unloading the springy marsh-land subsoil, produced the stresses which so seriously cracked Sir William Pelham's massive masonry. This masonry comes early in the history of English brickwork, or at least in secular English brickwork. The tower was built at the height of the Reformation. Henry VIII had been excommunicated in 1533 and the tower is contemporary with the Act of Supremacy (1534). Brick, which had previously enjoyed some favour in ecclesiastical building, then became popular for great houses, and in a suprisingly precise period—1520 to 1540—the use of terracotta flourished. That one of the remarkable examples should have been Laughton—a truly outlandish site, must reflect the influence of its builder, William Pelham, a remarkable man.

Born about 1486, he was older than Henry VIII by only four or five years. Living until 1538, he spans the period in which the influence of the Italian Renaissance made its first tentative appearance in England before being rejected, albeit temporarily, by the isolationist policy which followed the break with Rome. The way had been paved by the priests and scholars of the late 15th century—men such as Bishop Wayneflete, who had travelled to Rome and seen what was happening there. It was Wayneflete, too, who remodelled Esher Place in c.1480 on a courtyard plan, and added a tall brick gatehouse; he built a tower at Farnham Castle of which Nicholas Pevsner wrote: 'There is a

sense in which it is more Renaissance than the gauche ornamental system of a gatehouse like that of Layer Marney' (*Buildings of England, Surrey*).

One man who was strongly attracted to the new learning and who was in a position to sway the opinion of others was Cardinal Wolsey; and he was quick to encourage the young king. Henry VIII as a young man seemed the very personification of the ideal Renaissance prince, skilled in all the arts and sciences from music to horsemanship, and from scholarship to government. In his pursuit of excellence he was no doubt spurred on by a sense of rivalry with Francois I of France, a passionate student of the Renaissance. Both monarchs vied to attract Italian artists and craftsmen to their courts, but in this Henry was at a disadvantage; the climate of his country was hateful to the Italians; foreigners of any description, especially those seeking work, were equally hateful to, and liable to be mobbed by, his solidly conservative subjects.

A few Italian craftsmen did come to England, however, the most notable of whom was Torrigiano, who designed the tomb of Henry VII in Westminster Abbey. A number of other works in churches and houses have been ascribed to Italians, but it is questionable in just how many cases they were themselves present, rather than native craftsmen who had learnt the skills. The use of terracotta, in particular, is subject to just such uncertainty.

The suitability of this fine, hard, and easily moulded material for decorative purposes had been rediscovered in Lombardy in the 14th century, and used in combination with Classical motifs from about 1475. It was introduced into England by Italians but, the technique being only a refinement of brick-making, native craftsmen were quick to pick it up and use it to advantage for windows, chimneys, cornices, dressings and other features which, to their Gothic-trained eyes, seemed the better for some lively decoration. They worked as happily with the Classical motifs as with the traditional, the former simply widening the familiar vocabulary. Much of the decoration, indeed, is a direct transposition of 15th century timber detailing; for instance, the spandrels of the door heads at Laughton. The greatest surviving building with terracotta detailing is in Surrey, at Sutton Place. Vanished mansions near London—Nonsuch and others—may well have been its equal in terms of terracotta work.

Buildings with terracotta ornamentation are most common in East Anglia; East Barsham Hall and Great Snoring Rectory, for example, or, on a more spectacular scale, at Layer Marney. There, on the splendid gatehouse of a mansion begun by Lord Marney about 1520 but never completed, even the 'battlements' are of terracotta.

Lord Marney and Sir Richard Weston were both what are

known as Tudor 'new men', and it was mainly in these court circles that Italianate fashions were followed, although other 'old' families besides the Pelhams were known to favour it in a small way; tombs of the de la Warr family of Boxgrove and Broadwater in Sussex display similar motifs in stone to those at Laughton. In almost all cases, however, whether in terracotta, stone or wood, Classical Renaissance designs were limited to decorative details only, combined with a Gothic architectural framework, on the ribs of a vault, the members of a Perpendicular chancel screen or the mouldings of a pointed window.

Although William Pelham was not one of those who rose to great wealth and power through royal favour, he did serve at court, was present at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, and attended the king to another meeting with Francois in 1533. The actual extent of the work he carried out at Laughton is uncertain, but it may well be that he completely replaced the mediaeval house. Built into the front of the 18th century house there were a number of terracotta bricks which bore the Pelham Buckle and the inscription 'Lan de grace 1534 fut cest mayso faicte' and the initials W P. Unfortunately only one, rather worn, example of the inscribed buckle survives, above the second floor window.

It is possible also that William started the new house on a new site. On an estate map of c. 1640, a field to the north-west is called 'The ould-house', and it may be that there lay the mediaeval building. Round the new, and slightly higher site, a moat was dug, not only for defence but also to improve the drainage, and to provide materials to build up a platform inside it. Perhaps some clay was found for brick-making. However, the same map shows Laughton Place as a house of essentially mediaeval type, consisting of a hall, lighted by a large window, with rooms leading off it at either end, and a two-storey porch set asymmetrically in the front. The windows are Tudor in appearance and, departing from the strict mediaeval plan, the hall is a single tall chamber with a room above, anticipating the Elizabethan Great Chamber. The ceilings of the ground floor were higher than was common, as is shown by the height of the heavily moulded terracotta door-case discovered at first floor level in the east side of the tower, which led, presumably, into a solar or parlour of the main building.

It is possible therefore that the mediaeval Laughton Place did stand within the existing moat and that William Pelham did not rebuild but merely enlarged and improved it. He might have faced timber-framed walls in brick and incorporated terracotta ornamentation in the shape of a cornice and frieze, perhaps with string-courses, and windows, as in the tower. There were chimneys also, one or two of which survived the 18th century rebuilding, to be recorded in 1854; later noticed by Viscountess

Wolseley lying with other broken fragments of terracotta in the barns. On this theory, the house seen in the map, therefore, is all there ever was, simply a slightly modernised mediaeval hall-house.

One of the less obvious but more enduring results of this early phase of the Renaissance in England was the introduction of symmetry in the external arrangement of a building. Layer Marney as visualised, the Vyne and Sutton Place as originally built, and, on the largest scale, Hampton Court and the vanished Nonsuch, were all laid out round regular, if not actually square, courtyards, entered through a gatehouse placed centrally in the outer range, which itself often had corner towers. The principal apartments were in the range directly across the court but only at Sutton Place did symmetry extend to the placing of the main entrance centrally.

This introduces a second possibility as to the plan of the house at Laughton, although it need not necessarily contradict the first. The principal assumption is that the estate map does not give the complete picture. In part, this is actually demonstrable, because until quite recently there stood in the south-east corner of the moat a building known as the chapel barn, of brick with diaper work and having an octagonal stair turret on the corner. It was apparently of the same date as the tower, and therefore of the Tudor house, but it is not shown on the map. It is probable that this building was part of a gatehouse range running along the eastern side of the moat, linked by walls, or further ranges of building, to the principal block. During the recent restoration, brick footings were found along that side of the moat, with signs of turrets on the north-east corner and by the bridge, suggesting an entrance range, perhaps with a central gatehouse. By the time that the map came to be drawn up in c.1640 it is possible that this range had been reduced by demolition, the remainder being relegated to the status of out-houses, not considered of enough importance to be included.

The prime enigma is the location of the Tower, built on the north-west corner of the main house. Such a feature does not appear in any comparable building except as a gatehouse, or as one of a series of symmetrically placed corner towers. Laughton has been called a solar tower, a type that was not uncommon in the 15th century, and is found on the grandest scale at Tattershall in Lincolnshire. It has been argued that Tattershall and the towers that copied it derived from France, where similar structures, containing a complete set of apartments, were added to existing buildings at this period, partly to provide more private accommodation and partly for show.

Solar towers were still built in the early 16th century, at Thame Park for example, but by this period they had become rather luxurious, with large windows on at least three sides, so

that the rooms were light and comfortable. The tower at Laughton is rather underlit by these standards, and, although we cannot know how the interior was arranged and what its rooms were used for, it does not seem probable that it was built with only comfort and pleasure in mind.

But there was another sort of tower that was built in the Tudor period, which has been called the outlook tower. It has a viewing platform on its roof, and a chamber below which could also be used for observation. Often, this was reached directly from the ground floor by a stair which did not service the floors in between; virtually the arrangement at Laughton. They were generally constructed of brick and had small windows.

The earliest known example of this sort of tower was the Guyhirne Tower in the fens of Norfolk, built in the 1480s by Cardinal Morton as part of a drainage scheme. It served partly as a mark on which to align canals and cuttings, and partly as a survey point. The first that is known to have been attached to a house was in London, built in the early 16th century by a merchant who wished to be able to see over the other houses to the shipping on the river. Another was built at Little Wenham Hall in Suffolk. Nearest to Laughton, though, was the tower added by the Bishop of Chichester to his manor house at Cakeham, at the head of Chichester harbour, in about 1520. The tower is of three storeys, in the form of a pentagon, with an attached stair turret. It is a fascinating structure, changing its silhouette according to the angle from which it is seen, and built with what Nairn and Pevsner call 'the subtlety and suavity which was very typical of English architecture in the first half of the 16th century'. In addition to any domestic use, it clearly had a practical use as a mark for the harbour and as a lookout for shipping. There is another such at Apuledram near Chichester, though built in stone.

It seems likely that it is to this group that the Tower at Laughton belongs, set as it is in a flat and marshy landscape, with winding waterways and tortuous navigations where a mark could be useful, and a viewing point helpful. Tudor England enjoyed a fine view and the outlook tower itself developed into the 'belvedere', to which company might repair after dinner to enjoy the prospect. An example of this prospect exists at Melbury House in Dorset, and another at Lacock Abbey, a house which also bears the double stamp of Tudor Renaissance and Rococco Gothick.

Wealthy and well-travelled, William Pelham was probably familiar with the towers at London and Cakeham, and with solar towers, when he decided to add to his own new, or remodelled, house. He designed it with the stair leading only to the two topmost floors so that his servants would have been able to use it

for observation without entering the house. The chamber on the first floor, with its great window, had direct access into the solar at the High End of the hall. It was probably, if not a solar itself, at least a closet or parlour. It must be remembered also that the tower had northern and western appendages, each apparently of two storeys with tiled roofs.

Everything concerning the internal arrangement of Laughton Place in the 16th century, and of the gardens which must have lain to the west, must be speculation. We do not even know which 'chamber in Laughton House' was remembered by Thomas Pelham in 1620 in a letter to a cousin 'wherein were those arms of intermarriages of our house and with our house'. (*Some Early Pelhams, Hon. Mrs. Pelham and David McLean, London. 1931*). No documentary evidence survives to give descriptive detail, for later events were to relegate his new house to a much less prominent place in the family records than William Pelham had a right to hope.

Perhaps he had himself to blame for, in modern terms, the foundations of the tower are inadequate, and excessive settlement must have taken place within the early years of its use. Not only would the settlement have been substantial; it would have been uneven, for the turret is very much more massive than the remainder of the structure. The principal structural failure probably had occurred within twenty years of building, when a shear crack opened at the junction of the turret and the tower on the southern face, induced by the weakness of the wall produced by the two large super-imposed windows discovered during recent restoration works. These windows had been bricked up in the 17th century after the terracotta mullions of the lower had been crushed by the settlement. A further indication of a similar though futile attempt to remedy the inadequacy of the foundations was the contemporary brickwork built under the flying buttresses of the turret. One might hazard that these movements were one of the factors which convinced his great grandson that Halland was a more suitable site than Laughton.

The magnificent ground and first floor windows were the great discoveries of the restoration. Their existence was suggested by the pattern of fissures in the wall and by small sections of chamfer to the reveals. Their emergence displayed the very high quality of the building, and confirmed the use of the lower rooms. This was reinforced by the further discovery of the surviving part of the doorway at first floor level. The link with an earlier building to the east was at once apparent. The surviving parts of its door-case, in terracotta, are among the most robustly classical work in this material in England.

The extraordinary damage to the massive walls of the tower demands description. Cracks up to five inches in depth and

fifteen feet in length had opened up in the northern and southern faces. They were most pronounced towards mid-height, and, while generally vertical followed the line of diminished lateral strength produced by door or window openings, or by straight joints.

It must be borne in mind that the turret with its low flying buttresses was both a major concentrated load and a stabilising element. Summarising lengthy analyses, it can be said that the foundations were modest (and by modern standards inadequate), that the area under the turret was loaded even more heavily than other parts of the building and that the substratum is composed of compacted clays and marsh land of modest load-bearing capacity but having powers of recovery. In such conditions, a load as heavy as that of the great mass of brickwork in the tower must have produced differential settlement between the east face and the west, where stands the turret. Vertical shear between the two faces will have caused vertical stress across both northern and southern faces, which has shown itself as strains along lines of diminished resistance to vertical shear. These strains express themselves as cracks when stimulated by the additional stress of varying ground loadings or pressures. The marshy ground would have been particularly susceptible to changes in the water table and to variations in loading; and over the centuries different building masses have been placed upon the ground beside the tower and then removed, altering the adjacent loads, until finally the tower stood in isolation.

The consequent movements of settlement and recovery are sufficient to explain — and probably do explain — the dramatically shattered condition of the building when it passed into the ownership of the Trust. The position might have been much worse but for the reinforced concrete roof slab carried on rolled steel joists. This provided a rigid restraint to the brickwork, and in all probability saved the building by extending its life into the era of conservation.

The first essential in dealing with a building so damaged was to ensure its stability. With the intention of neutralising all thrusts by keeping them within the structure, a straight-jacket of scaffolding, braced vertically and horizontally, was set up around the tower and from this scaffolding a series of screw-jacks were tightened on to timber plates against the brickwork. Thus secured, an internal system of steel tie rods was introduced at each floor level running parallel with the walls. Stainless steel was used and the rods were substantially over-sized, partly due to availability of material and partly because the factors controlling calculations of this type are the subject of such broad assumptions that the solution is best obtained by experienced estimation. If the tower has to respond to fluctuating ground conditions in the

future, its structural coherence will be such that the internal stresses will be taken up in the forgiving lime-mortars with which it was built and by an evening up of the stresses beneath the foundations.

Having been structurally secured, the cracks in the masonry were repaired by cutting out adjacent brickwork and rebuilding the relevant sections of walling. The mortars throughout were made with a white Reigate sand and the lime came from the Tottenhoe Works, Bedfordshire. It was slaked on site and held as putty. The new bricks required were made at the Swanage Brickworks, their texture and quality providing a very satisfactory complement to the originals. This manufacturer made all the necessary replacements of large and specially shaped bricks needed to replace missing terracotta. Floor tiles came from the same source, the quarries on the ground floor being lozenge-ended to match the originals, and the remainder square. Some of the 16th century floor quarries carried a glaze which was probably accidental. It is also found on various of the moulded sections of terracotta where clearly it was not intended.

On close examination, it is clear that many of the pieces of terracotta are of second or third-rate quality, having deformed in firing or having been warped, cracked or over-burned. One quite reasonable conclusion from this evidence is that the pieces supplied to Laughton for the Tower were the rejects from the first selection of material. It would be quite reasonable to postulate the building of a more important house elsewhere—perhaps in London—for which the designs incorporating the Pelham motifs had been prepared, the work at Laughton being carried out with the surplus materials, shipped to the site after completion. Such an argument would explain the somewhat rustic and occasionally adaptive use of pieces, and opens the way to wider speculation.

Surviving terracotta has been repaired using epoxy resins keyed with fibre-glass dowelling. No attempt has been made to simulate the original terracotta work nor have terracotta fragments been built in out of place, though occasional spares and displaced elements were found and could have been so used. Where necessary, for architectural reasons, therefore, new pieces were made to the approximate profile and size of the originals. Thus the new work can be easily distinguished. In constructing new masonry, the face-work necessarily obliterated evidence contained in the backing. Wherever this occurred, the evidence has been repeated in the face-work as a matter of historical statement, though the work itself is new.

The formulation of a recipe for the mortar followed the discovery of areas of original pointing. These had been concealed in the soffits of the arches to the flying buttresses, which had been walled up at an early stage. The pointing was pristine, and it was

copied with care and skill. The original sands had contained substantial amounts of sea-shell, and were probably brought in from the estuary of the Ouse.

Once it had been resolved that a minimum of alteration should be made, two small extensions were inevitable. These were designed as quarter octagons, one at ground and one at second floor level, tucked into the re-entrant angle between tower and turret. Each of the four original rooms is thus left as a complete and identifiable space. The finishes are simple. A coarse sanded plaster on the walls and ceilings is finished with a conventional lime-wash. The roof and topmost floors are tiled with brick quarries from the Swanage works, and similar lozenge-shaped quarries are used at ground level, which, to judge by the level of the lowest tread in the turret stairs, may itself not have been original. The first floor is of oak, button-fixed, incorporating, as do all the floors, the surviving oak girders which had been proof even against the final stages of decay which left the remainder of the woodwork a mouldering mass on the ground floor.

The restoration philosophy of the Landmark Trust, unwritten, but evident in all its work, is inherently straightforward. A minimum of addition coupled with careful repair are its planks: and fortunately Laughton Place demanded minimal addition. As it was impossible to reach the second floor from the stair turret, a link had to be formed for this purpose. A bathroom could not be provided readily but an ancient doorway, later blocked, allowed the construction of a convenient small space at the foot of the stairs. Thus there arose the two small additions, based on quartered octagonal plans, tucked into the re-entrant angle between tower and turret. The upper was carried on a long tapering brick corbel and was roofed in stone to match the tops of the buttresses. Between the ground and first floor the internal stair was replaced, in a position changed from that of the 18th or 19th century stair to avoid the rediscovered south windows.

The only other significant re-instatement was a rebuilding of the merlons to restore the battlements. Fortunately there remained a section of the final merlon which had abutted the turret on the western side, built into the more substantial brickwork of the turret itself. This gave the precise constructional details and heights and established the method of coping. There was no documentary or vestigial evidence for the number of merlons and embrasures, but the dimensions of the tower demanded the arrangements adopted, which proved compatible with the inevitable form of the battlements on the turret.

The reprieve of Laughton Place is a matter of special relief, for the number of 16th century English buildings employing terracotta is very small and its period of use was very limited. The

building is astonishingly complete, and the quality of the terracotta work is high and very sophisticated. That it will now remain to be enjoyed by many generations is an occasion for gratitude to the Landmark Trust.